

Ancient Near Eastern Mythology

Part I

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Professor Goldman is the editor of *Hebrew and the Bible in America* (1993) and the author of *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish and Islamic Folklore* (1995) and *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (2004).

At Emory, he teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in Middle Eastern Studies and conducts a graduate seminar in the program in Comparative Literature.

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Ancient Near Eastern Mythology

Scope:

This series of 24 lectures introduces the student to the great myths of the ancient Near East. Humankind's first recorded myths and legends were the product of the area long known as the "cradle of civilization," the region bound by Egypt and the Mediterranean in the west, Iran in the east, Anatolia in the north, and the Arabian Peninsula in the south. With the development of city-states in the late fourth millennium B.C., a number of sophisticated cultures emerged.

Lecture One introduces the major themes and overall plan of the course and gives the student a sense of the present-day study of the topic. Lectures Two and Three provide a historical survey of the major cultures of the ancient Near Eastern world. Lecture Two focuses on Mesopotamia and Egypt; Lecture Three, on the Hittites and the Canaanites. Each lecture emphasizes the strong links among geography, politics, and religious ideas.

Lectures Four and Five trace the development of Near Eastern archaeology and decipherment. These sciences enabled modern scholars to reconstruct, interpret, and contextualize the foundational stories of the ancient world. The remarkable history of the development of writing is recounted, because the history of writing is tied directly to the history of myth. Among the first recorded documents were stories of gods, humans, animals, and spirit-beings. Reading them today, we enrich our understanding of the origins of civilization. For many modern readers, these stories not only serve as keys to the past, but they also give meaning to the present and the future.

This question of the "meaning of myth" and its notoriously difficult definition is examined in Lectures Six and Seven. Many 19th- and 20th-century scholars of religion, philosophy, and literature have engaged these questions. In what sense are myths "true" or "untrue"? What is the relationship between religion and myth? And what part does ritual play in the expression of mythic ideas? Are myths an explanation for otherwise unexplained phenomena? Or are they expressions of commonly shared human dreams and yearnings? In relation to the question of myth, Lecture Seven discusses the "Bible and Babel" issue. The Hebrew Bible is a product of this same Near Eastern cradle of civilization, and many of its early narratives are strikingly similar to ancient Near Eastern myths. Among these are accounts of creation, records of a universal flood, and biographies of divinely inspired heroes. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the decipherment and publication of ancient myths, especially those of Babylon (hence the term "Bible and Babel"), caused great consternation in many circles, because the publication of myths parallel to biblical stories was perceived as a threat to organized religion. Conversely, a movement arose that sought in archaeology and decipherment a confirmation of the "biblical truth."

The subsequent lectures (Eight through Twenty-Four) provide detailed examinations of individual Near Eastern myths. Each story is presented in its specific cultural context; though there were shared cultural values in the wider Near Eastern sphere, the stories reveal their richness only when the local cultural nuances are revealed. The lectures are grouped thematically. We begin with the pantheons of the gods (Lectures Eight and Nine), then move to tales of creation and the exploits of the gods (Lectures Ten and Eleven). Lectures Twelve and Thirteen recount the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and describe the discovery and decipherment of that epic.

Lectures Fourteen through Twenty-Four continue this thematic approach. The threat of death, destruction, and disruption was a constant concern of ancient (and modern!) societies. Man's place in the social world, and woman's place—were they stable? Or might they be subject to violent change? Lectures Fourteen and Fifteen examine stories that attempted to answer these questions. Lectures Sixteen and Seventeen focus on texts that reflect the relationship between society and the individual. These include relationships defined and regulated by legal texts, such as the famous Code of Hammurabi, and narrative texts, such as the Egyptian "Tale of the Eloquent Peasant."

Relations between the sexes and the social arrangements governing those arrangements inform the tales told in Lectures Eighteen and Nineteen. In the strictly hierarchical societies of the Near East, the rules governing the conduct of commoners and those governing the conduct of royalty and the priesthood were markedly different. Lectures Twenty and Twenty-One tell of the adventures of kings, queens, and priests. Great poems, hymns, and other works of art were attributed to rulers and religious visionaries. In Lectures Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three, we read and interpret some of their artistic creations, including the great "Hymn to the Sun" of the Pharaoh Akhenaten. The series closes with close readings of *wisdom literature*, stories and proverbs that attempt to answer humanity's oldest and deepest questions about the conduct and meaning of life.

The goal of the course is to introduce the myths of the ancient Near East to the modern reader, to trace the powerful influence of those myths on later cultures, and to encourage intellectual inquiry into the fascinating relationships among myth, religion, and literature.

Lecture One

Studying Ancient Near Eastern Myth

Scope: This first lecture introduces the major themes and overall plan of the course. Three main points are covered. First, the lecture offers a set of reasons for reading and studying these myths 3,000 and more years after they were first recorded. Second, it surveys a number of different approaches to the study of myth in general and to the study of ancient Near Eastern myth in particular. Third, it outlines the course's thematically organized approach to the material. In this approach, we move from initial lectures on the history, archaeology, and religions of the ancient Near East to detailed examinations of individual myths. The myths are grouped thematically, beginning with accounts of creation and ending with tales of death and the achievement of wisdom. The lecture closes with observations on the wide scope of the topic and the current state of its study.

Outline

- I. We will begin with a survey of reasons to study ancient Near Eastern myths and with a set of definitions of *myth*.
 - A. Myths are among the earliest recorded stories, many dating from the third millennium B.C.
 1. These myths mirror and reflect social realities that otherwise would be hidden.
 2. Myths, legends, and other literary texts offer the reader the pleasures of literature and can be read for sheer enjoyment.
 - B. There is a great diversity of opinion on the definition of *myth*. *Myth* and *truth* are often presented as opposites. In studying the ancient myths, we will see that they can reflect and embody truth.
 1. Some scholars restrict *myth* to tales of the gods and *legend* to tales of human beings. In this course, we will use *myth* in its widest sense—imaginative stories told in many forms. Ours is a literary definition. We will study a variety of texts from the Near East.
 2. Mythic material is recorded in epic poetry, such as in the *Gilgamesh* cycle. It is also embedded in other types of writing—incantations, hymns, and historical documents, such as king lists. The Sumerian king list begins with monarchs who lived for centuries.
- II. The meaning and function of myth is the subject of great debate. We will outline four approaches to the question and refer to these approaches throughout the course.
 - A. Myth serves as ancient science, that is, that tales of the gods and early humans function as explanations. They can explain:
 1. The origins of the natural world and the origins of humanity. This is done through *creation tales*.
 2. The existing social order, the necessity of hierarchy, and the way in which the social order may be changed. Kings are appointed by the gods and removed by the gods.
 3. The presence of illness and death, for example, the “worm” that causes toothache.
 - B. Myth reflects and refracts the memory of historical events.
 1. Tales of the gods and their exploits mirror the activities of human rulers.
 2. The gods are organized like a royal family, with the attendant rivalries and ensuing conflicts.
 3. Although myths may disguise historical reality, archaeology may help us uncover it and relate myth to history. The archaeological record reveals that Gilgamesh was an actual king. After his death, legends were woven around the great hero.
 - C. A “myth and ritual” approach links religious practice and sacred narrative.
 1. In ritual, humans worship the divine; in myth, they express their ideas about the role of the divine in the world.
 2. Together, the performance of ritual and the repetition of myth ensured a “cosmic harmony.” An example can be found in the sacred new year’s hymn of the Babylonians.
 3. The continuity of individual and community life was dependent on that cosmic harmony. If myth or ritual were disrupted, life would be disrupted.
 - D. Myths embody psychological and spiritual truths.

1. This approach focuses on the universality of themes in mythic tales. Creation myths, which we find among many (but by no means all) peoples, demonstrate structural similarities across time and place. Many creation myths are based on a separation motif.
 2. These common threads of human thought are seen as a reflection of a common human consciousness. Myth, according to Carl Jung, originates in fantasy and dream and is then “translated” into narrative form.
 3. Proponents of this approach see a relationship between the dream and fantasy material of people today and the mythic material of the peoples of the ancient past, including the ancient Near East.
- E. Each of the meanings of myth—as science, as reflecting historical reality, as a function of ritual, and as psychological/spiritual truth—has its proponents. They all have something to contribute to our study of myth.
- III. In this course, we will take the approach that these different understandings of myth are not mutually exclusive. When examining individual myths, we will take a variety of approaches to their meaning and function.
- A. Before we study individual myths, we will review a set of background materials that will enable us to contextualize the myths in their historical settings.
1. We begin by surveying the history of the ancient Near East, focusing first on Egypt and Mesopotamia, then on the Canaanites and the Hittites.
 2. We then move to archaeology and decipherment: How were the ancient Near Eastern myths uncovered, deciphered, and translated?
 3. This returns us to the question of the meaning of *myth* against the background of our survey of Near Eastern history and archaeology. We examine the relationship of the Bible and myth at this point. Much of the early Western interest in Egypt and Mesopotamia stemmed from a wish to understand biblical history.
- B. In Lecture Eight, we begin our recounting and analysis of individual myths. We start with descriptions of the pantheons of the gods and their place in the creation narratives.

Essential Reading:

Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. xv–xix.

Henrietta McCall, *Mesopotamian Myths*, pp. 7–8.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 1–26.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are the four approaches to myth relevant to the study of “modern myths,” such as urban legends?
2. Is the distinction between myth and literature artificial?

Lecture Two

The Emergence of Civilization in the Near East

Scope: Lecture Two examines the historical context in which Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths were created and recorded. Conditions in both the Land of the Nile and the Land of the Two Rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, enabled the gradual emergence of urban culture in the centuries before 3000 B.C. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, we see in this period the beginnings of political organization, commerce, architecture, and systems of writing. Civilization in both countries was based on a large population with a steady and reliable food supply. Religious systems and their central myths were key features of these first societies. The conclusion of the lecture will outline a set of comparisons between Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures.

Outline

- I. We can understand the title of this lecture in two ways: first, as a description of how Near Eastern cultures were originally organized and, second, as an assertion that civilization first emerged in the Near East. Let us sketch some of the factors that led to the emergence, in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, of a culture with urban centers, c. 3400 B.C., and by c. 3000 B.C., the first royal dynasties in both.
- II. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, this urban culture was preceded by a long period of development: *prehistory*—before writing systems were fully developed.
 - A. Settled villages developed in 6000–4000 B.C. as a result of the Neolithic revolution. Both cultures experienced the gradual transition from dependence on hunting and gathering to dependence on food produced by settled groups engaged in agriculture.
 1. This transition, which has been traced and documented through the archaeology of prehistory, occurred at various locations in the Near East. Along with settlement came the production of pottery.
 2. The area was rich in the necessary materials: clay, water, and fuel. The pottery shards are a “clock” by which prehistory can be reconstructed.
 - B. The period from 4000–3000 B.C. is called the *protoliterate* period, in which some settled villages acquired political power, enabling them to grow into urban centers. These centers accrued political power, which was often expressed in religious ideas.
- III. In Mesopotamia, c. 3500 B.C., these settlements became more complex and, with their increase in political and military power, some became cities.
 - A. Among the earliest features of these cities were a temple complex and a palace. The palace was often at the highest or central part of the city; the temple was in a more secluded, less accessible area. The Sumerians in southern Iraq were the first builders of city-states. These were characterized by large-scale building projects in which religious and administrative centers were erected.
 - B. The transition from agricultural villages to towns has not yet been fully explained—and may never be.
 - C. By 3000 B.C., dynasties of urban rulers were established in Egypt and Mesopotamia. We know of them, and here, we enter *history*, because by this time, writing systems had developed in both cultures: Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform.
 - D. The 4000–3000 B.C. protoliterate period saw the development, evolution, and organization of urban life, with royalty, administrators, military, police, temple functionaries, and of course, outsiders, including refugees, criminals, foreigners, and prostitutes (the full panoply of city life!).
- IV. For the purposes of this lecture series, we need an understanding of the historical context in which myth developed.
 - A. We shall see that many of the myths we will study in the course reflect these transitions. For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* comments on the natural world versus the urban world. This is in keeping with the view that myth reflects historical memory and explains historical change.
 - B. Among the answers offered to the question of the transition from village to urban life are the following:

1. Surplus of wealth theory. As villages produced more food than they needed, the notion of wealth and a wealthy ruling class developed. Freeing some people from work enabled artisan guilds to emerge. Rulers emerged from the wealthy class.
 2. Religion as a major factor. Belief in local deities gave cohesion to social groups. Temples in which the deities were worshipped became the physical and spiritual centers of the settlement.
 3. Challenge and response. The river valleys provided fertile land and water, but they challenged the settlers because the rivers had to be controlled, harnessed. This led to controlled irrigation, which had to be organized and administered.
- V. There are debates about the relative development of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The scholarly consensus today is that Mesopotamian centers developed somewhat earlier; along the same lines is the belief that the full development of the cuneiform writing system was reached earlier than the full development of hieroglyphs in Egypt.
- A. There is a major difference between Egypt and Mesopotamia.
 1. In both valleys, the river systems, the Nile in Egypt and the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, deposit silt along the plain. This enables many crop cycles and the production of surplus food.
 2. In Egypt, the inundation of the Nile was predictable. It began in the early summer and subsided in the fall. Planting and harvesting could be planned.
 3. The overflow of the Nile was, thus, a blessing. This is reflected in myth, as we shall see in our study of Egyptian tales. The god of the Nile is Hapy, a smiling, beneficent god.
 4. An elaborate irrigation system caught the overflow of the river. Power was centralized in a national center, and that center was ruled by one king, the pharaoh.
 - B. In Mesopotamia, the systems worked differently.
 1. Irrigation was a local project, not a national one.
 2. The inundation cycles were not predictable.
 3. Individual city-states emerged. Irrigation and agriculture were controlled by local authority, and that authority was represented by a local deity.
 4. These local centers were organized into confederations.
 5. Around 2500 B.C., the Sumerian kingdom had approximately 30 such city-states under its control.
 - C. Culture in each society reflected these basic differences. This is reflected in myth, for example, the Egyptian reference to the source of rain as “the Nile in the sky.” In Syria-Palestine, farmers were dependent on rain, because there were no great river systems.

Essential Reading:

Daniel C. Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East: 3100–332 BCE*, pp. 11–29.

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 1–14.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 26–52.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are there parallels to the temple-palace relationship in other cultures?
2. Was the transition from preliterate to literate societies sudden or gradual? What is the material evidence of this transition?

Lecture Three

Hittites and Canaanites

Scope: Egypt and Mesopotamia were the “superpowers” of the Near East. In between them was the Arabian Peninsula, with its northern extension on the eastern Mediterranean coast. To the north lay the Hittite lands. This lecture begins with a description of the area’s city-states, which were buffeted constantly by the struggles between the great powers. Canaanites, Moabites, Phoenicians, Edomites, and other peoples familiar to us from biblical narratives were among the region’s inhabitants. The religions and myths of these peoples were at times startlingly different from those of their more powerful neighbors. The lecture concludes with a survey of Hittite culture and myth. In the second millennium B.C., the Hittites were a world power; in the middle of that millennium, they rivaled Egypt and Babylon.

Outline

- I. In contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine—the northern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula—were not the seats of great empires. Rather, they were often ruled, directly or indirectly, by those empires.
 - A. The material remains of this area, especially the textual evidence, are small, therefore, in comparison with the evidence of the great empires. City-states did emerge in this area. They were often dependent on trade.
 - B. In the third millennium B.C., when the Old Kingdom rulers in Egypt and the Sumerian kings in Mesopotamia were ruling cities within their own borders, the city of Ebla (Tell Mardikh) arose in Syria, between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean. Its economic and political influence extended over much of northern Syria.
 1. The site of this unknown kingdom was discovered in the 1970s by Italian archaeologists digging in Syria. The archives of the city palace were discovered. They tell of the economic life of this city-state, as well as its political power.
 2. Ebla burned in a military campaign circa 2400 B.C.; it was revived for two centuries, from 1800–1600 B.C., then destroyed again. We do not *yet* have myths from Ebla.
- II. We can contrast this situation to that of the city-state of Ugarit, a city of the second millennium B.C. on the Mediterranean coast. Excavations here have uncovered administrative texts and a rich collection of mythic texts.
 - A. The name of Ugarit was known from archival documents of the Hittites, but the location of the city was unknown until its discovery in 1928. Since then, it has been explored and excavated by French archaeologists.
 - B. Ugarit’s location—at a natural harbor—placed it in an ideal trading position. Directly across the sea from Cyprus, the city was a natural center for trade between Egypt and the Hittite kingdom.
 - C. Among the many literary texts from Ugarit is the *Epic of the Gods*, which we will study in Lecture Eleven. Ugarit was destroyed during the invasions of the Sea Peoples, c. 1100 B.C.
 - D. Traces of Ugaritic culture are preserved in the biblical traditions. The language of Ugarit is closely related to Hebrew.
- III. In Anatolia, city-states arose in the second millennium B.C.
 - A. A Hittite kingdom, centered in the city of Hattusas, was established c. 1800 B.C.
 - B. The Hittite Empire, which conquered Babylon, was powerful between 1500–1200 B.C.
 - C. We have some myths of the Hittites, including the tale of Kumarbi. We will examine these myths in Lecture Fifteen.
 1. The Hittite myths offer us illustrations of the intimate relationship between myth and ritual.
 2. The archaeological remains of the Hittite Empire are in Turkey.
 3. The artifacts and texts of the Hittites were cultural factors in the formation of modern Turkish identity. This link between ancient Near Eastern cultures and modern political states can be seen in all modern Middle Eastern states.

4. Until the late 19th century, the Hittites (unlike the Egyptians and Sumerians) were a truly “lost” civilization. Although their name was preserved in the Hebrew Bible, there was no intimation that there had been a great Hittite Empire.
5. But we now understand that the Hittites themselves were outsiders in Canaan and that through diplomacy and trade, they acquired land holdings in other areas, including Canaan.
6. The Hittite Empire was discovered in the 19th century through archaeological and philological methods.
7. In the 1910s, excavations at Hattusas uncovered tens of thousands of cuneiform documents that demonstrated the high development of the culture and its connections in other Near Eastern cultures.
8. Among the cuneiform tablets were many myths, including differing versions of myths.
9. These ancient texts typically lacked named authors and titles.

Essential Reading:

Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla*, pp. 1–50.

Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, pp. 88–94.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 20–30.

Questions to Consider:

1. Is “superpower influence” beneficial or harmful to smaller states?
2. What international situation evolves from multiple centers of power?

Lecture Four

Archaeology, Science, and Ideology

Scope: The development of scientific archaeology in the 19th and 20th centuries enabled scholars to reconstruct and reinterpret ancient Near Eastern history. This lecture surveys the major developments in the archaeology of the Near East, a field first known as *biblical archaeology*. The move away from a Bible-centered view of the history of the Near East was a contested one, and the tension around this issue continues to influence contemporary understandings of the ancient world. We will discuss archaeological methods, including the development and refinement of techniques of excavation. Stratification and the importance of pottery finds are emphasized in the context of a description of the contributions of scientific discovery to archaeological method. The lecture concludes with a description of some ideological issues related to archaeology in the Near East.

Outline

- I. In the 19th century, archaeology in the Near East was primarily the search for objects, such as coins, statues, and inscriptions. There was a plunder aspect to this venture—taking artifacts from the East and bringing them to the museums of the West. The vast collections of the Louvre and the British Museum were built up in this way.
 - A. With the development of scientific archaeology, attention was paid to the site as much as to the artifact.
 - B. With attention to the site came an awareness of stratification, that is, that Near Eastern settlement extended over millennia and that over time, layers of habitation were built up one over the other.
 - C. This stratification was the way that *tells* were formed.
 1. A *tell* is a settlement mound formed over centuries by successive habitation. The Near East is riddled with them. Many tells have become famous for what they have revealed about the past (for example, Tel el-Amarna in Egypt, site of Akhetaten, the city of Akhenaten).
 2. One of hundreds of examples from Mesopotamia is Tell Kuyunjik, today part of the Iraqi city of Mosul. Excavations began there in the 1840s. Slowly, the tell gave up its secrets—it was the Assyrian city of Nineveh and on it was the palace of Sennacherib, a king from the seventh century B.C. renowned as the destroyer of Babylon.
 3. Digging through Mesopotamian tells in an organized fashion enabled archaeologists to assign dates to each layer and, in this way, to trace the rise and fall of city-states.
- II. The sequence of settlements, and of layers of habitation in any one period, was designated by pottery type.
 - A. The pottery of each period is distinctive in terms of the composition of the clay and the techniques of shaping, baking, and decorating the pottery.
 1. Pottery may be shattered and scattered, but it doesn't disintegrate.
 2. It can be found in every layer of settlement and, thus, provides a permanent record of human activity at that settlement.
 - B. Pottery production began approximately 9,000 years ago, c. 7000 B.C. Throughout the Near East were areas that had the raw materials necessary to make pottery: water, clay, fuel to fire the oven or kiln, and pigments with which to decorate the pottery. Cultures that preceded this development are called *aceramic*.
 - C. As moderns, we need to remember that pottery was not a recreational craft of self-expression. It was the only way to produce eating and drinking vessels.

- III. Stratification and the study of pottery became the foundations of scientific archaeology. Armed with these techniques, archaeologists found as much interest in the site as in the discovery of artifacts, and from the 1930s onward, we have excavations of tells. Archaeologists go through all the successive habitation layers until the tell reaches the deepest layer with any sign of human activity.
- IV. Interest in Near Eastern archaeology was conditioned by a biblical worldview.
- A. Wooley's excavations at Ur, in which he uncovered the royal cemetery and its spectacular collection of grave goods, including gold jewelry, caught the imagination of Western readers. His findings made headlines.
 - B. An important factor in that publicity and the sustained public interest in his projects was the biblical connection. Ur was familiar to all readers of the Bible as the city from which Abraham's family originated. For those eager to find that scientific archaeology confirmed the "biblical truth," the discovery of Ur, like the discovery of Nineveh at Tell Kuyunjik in Mosul, was a "godsend." The fact that Wooley could demonstrate that there had been a flood in ancient Iraq further tied his finds to the biblical narrative of Noah's flood.
 - 1. In the 1930s, as in the mid-19th century when Near East excavation began, the Bible was still a basic foundational element in Western culture. Educated Europeans and Americans knew of ancient Mesopotamia from one source: the Bible.
 - 2. Discoveries in Egypt also caught Western attention; witness the reaction to the 1922 discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen. In the case of that astounding discovery, however, biblical connections didn't play a direct part.
 - C. Let us then distinguish between modern Western reactions to and interest in Egypt and Mesopotamia.
 - 1. The West had always known of Egypt—travelers to Egypt could see the ruins of a great civilization; museum-goers could see its artifacts in their home cities. European and American cities erected Egyptian obelisks, both actual obelisks and copies. Hieroglyphs were a topic of fascination since the Renaissance.
 - 2. Ancient Mesopotamia had few standing monuments, though travelers might try to identify ancient city sites. Many 18th- and 19th-century European travelers wondered where Babylon had been. *Mesopotamia* meant *Babylon*, because the sole cultural connection between the West and Mesopotamia was Babylon's biblical fame or infamy.
 - 3. Babylon was condemned in the Bible and destroyed (see Rastafarians and Babylon). Archaeologists and the universities and foundations that employed them used this biblical connection as a way to raise funds and generate public interest.
- V. American scholars were pioneers in this archaeology and Bible nexus.
- A. Before scientific excavation, in the "hunting and gathering" period of discovery, Edward Robinson was a pivotal figure in what later would be dubbed *biblical archaeology*.
 - 1. In 1836 and 1852, Robinson, a prominent Protestant clergyman, and his colleague Eli Smith journeyed to Palestine to map the country's biblical sites. His account of his travels, *Biblical Researches in Palestine*, was one of the best-selling American books in the period before the Civil War.
 - 2. Many famous archaeologists and scholars of the ancient Near East were clergymen or had affiliations with seminaries and divinity schools.
 - B. *Biblical archaeology* was a term applied to excavation in Palestine and elsewhere in the Near East.
 - 1. In the mid-20th century, the term *biblical archaeology* was criticized. The field is now known as *Near Eastern archaeology*.
 - 2. One aspect of the critique was mapped on to the Arab-Israeli conflict of the second half of the 20th century. Israel, the site of many excavations, identified itself as a reborn biblical nation. This was the way many Christians viewed it. This biblical view of contemporary politics was objectionable to citizens and governments of Egypt, Iraq, and other Arab states.
 - C. Other ideological components and developments entered the debate:
 - 1. By the mid-19th century, both Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform had been deciphered.
 - 2. As excavation and decipherment revealed the richness and complexity of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, both scholars and the public realized that the area was of interest for its own sake and not

- only in relation to the biblical narratives. Western scholars identified the Near East as “the cradle of civilization.”
3. This raised a fierce academic debate; terminology was seen as all- important and self-defining. But the public was not interested in this debate. For general consumption, the term *biblical archaeology* is still used, to great effect.
 4. In the second half of the 20th century, there was a shift from biblical connections and an emphasis on finds that tell us only about the lives of royalty and nobility. Rather, a more encompassing view of history emerged that sought to uncover the daily life of commoners.

Essential Reading:

A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, pp. 1–32.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 26–40.

Questions to Consider:

1. What ethical questions are raised by the history of archaeology in the Near East?
2. Is the Bible as central to Western culture as it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? Does a biblical orientation still influence archaeological research?

Lecture Five

Principles of Writing Systems

Scope: From the late 18th century onward, scholars, explorers, and adventurers in the Near East copied and collected inscriptions. They took them from the surfaces of tombs and palaces and found them on the ubiquitous clay tablets scattered in the rubble of ruins. This lecture describes major developments in the history of decipherment and explains the basic principles on which the ancient writing systems were based. We will examine both the ancient mythic stories of the origins of writing and the modern scientific understanding of that remarkable set of developments. The key to ancient Egyptian was uncovered by two scholars, the Englishman Thomas Young and the Frenchman Jean Francois Champollion, in the first decades of the 19th century. The discovery that enabled the decipherment was the Rosetta Stone, a black basalt slab with a Greek and Egyptian inscription. In the same early decades of the 19th century, German Orientalists, led by Georg Friedrich Grotefend, began the decipherment of the cuneiform scripts of Mesopotamia. In the conclusion, the lecture notes that once ancient Egyptian and the cuneiform languages were deciphered, scholars could see common principles underlying these very different writing systems. In the past two decades, new research has refined our understanding of the emergence of writing systems. That research indicates that writing has a traceable prehistory, one in which pictures, markings, and tokens were used to keep records and facilitate commercial transactions.

Outline

- I. One of the classical myths about the origins of writing is that it was given to the Babylonians by a sea creature, Oanes. This is one of many myths in which the Greeks and Romans ascribed the origins of culture to the Egyptians and Babylonians.
 - A. Some Babylonian texts ascribe the origins of writing to the god Ea, who was the source of “secret knowledge.” The Sumerian myth of Enmerkar tells of a king’s invention of writing on clay.
 - B. The idea that writing was a previously held secret that was revealed at some point also informed a common premodern idea in Christian Europe.
 1. That God gave writing to man—in one account, that the giving of the Ten Commandments also included the first writing—was commonly accepted.
 2. For premodern believers in the biblical tradition, the first script, and the first language, was Hebrew. Creation through the word of God was the dominant theme of the Genesis account, and that “word” must have been in Hebrew.
 3. The Bible’s story of the Tower of Babel is a narrative that attempts to explain why humans have different languages.
 4. Another consideration of the question of what was the original language can be found in Herodotus’s account of an Egyptian tale that claims Egyptian as humanity’s original language.
- II. The archaeological discoveries of the 19th century challenged these notions of language, just as they challenged ideas of the age of the earth. The age of the earth was far greater than the Genesis account would allow, and the origins of language were more complex than myth allowed.
 - A. The many inscriptions discovered throughout the Near East pointed to an evolutionary development of writing, just as the discovery of the fossil record pointed to the evolutionary development of all life forms. Thus, culture evolves, as does nature. Today, this is self-evident, a keystone of modern thought.
 - B. One hundred and fifty years ago, in the first decades of the rediscovery of the ancient Near East, the idea was revolutionary. We now understand that writing systems evolved and that their evolution to the point where they could be widely used was the single most important factor in the formation of culture and all that *civilization* implies.

- III. By 3300 B.C. in the area of Uruk or Warka in southern Iraq, the Sumerians were producing accounting and administrative documents. Within two to three centuries, the Egyptians were employing their *hieroglyphic* system for similar purposes.
- A. By *accounting documents*, we mean lists—not very interesting for the student of myth and literature, but very important for our understanding of how writing and language evolved to the point where myth could be recorded in literary texts.
 - B. In both Mesopotamia and Egypt, accounting and administrative texts precede literary texts, and these lists constitute the great bulk of what remains from these cultures.
 - C. Thus, “four sheep, two jars of oil, seven small bundles of acacia wood” is how most of the extant documents read. “He is a companion of the gods. He sits among them and listens to music,” a line from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is not the usual ancient Near Eastern text.
- IV. In Sumer and later throughout Mesopotamia, the cuneiform script developed and spread.
- A. This script, “wedge-shaped,” is written on wet clay with a reed stylus. The clay is then baked, and the inscription is preserved. Reeds and clay were common materials in the well-irrigated terrain of the Land of the Two Rivers. Each cuneiform sign represents a syllable, for example, *ak, ku, me*. A word is composed of a group of signs.
 - B. Hieroglyphs (Greek “holy signs,” parallel to Egyptian “god’s words”) use a less abstract form of word representation. Each hieroglyphic sign represents an object or being—human or animal.
 - 1. Each hieroglyphic sign represents either a sound or a marker that tells the reader what category of word is represented. This is termed the *determinative*.
 - 2. Over Egyptian history, the basic list of hieroglyphic signs was between 750 and 1,000.
- V. Both the cuneiform and hieroglyphic systems strike us today as quite cumbersome. It took years for scribes to learn the writing systems; thus, literacy was confined to an elite in each culture.
- A. It is only in the beginning of the first millennium B.C. (c. 1000–800) that we have the spread of the 22 letter *alphabet*. Thus, the great majority of the myths, legends, and historical narratives that we will examine in this course were first written in either the cuneiform languages or in Egyptian hieroglyphs.
 - B. Some myths were preserved in the alphabetic scripts.
- VI. Let us distinguish between *script* and *language*. We use the Latin *script* to write English; that same script is used in Turkish and Swahili. Thus, a shared script does not imply a shared language or a shared language group. Similarly, Sumerian was written in cuneiform script. Later, other languages from other language groups were written in cuneiform script, for example, Akkadian, Hittite, later in the Mediterranean sphere—e.g., Ugaritic.
- VII. With Egyptian hieroglyphs, the situation is quite different.
- A. In its various forms, hieroglyphs served as the script of the Egyptian language as that language evolved over 3,000 years of Egyptian history.
 - B. With the establishment of scribal schools in both Mesopotamian city-states and in Egypt, literacy spread.
 - C. The awareness over time that information can be stored and retrieved led to changes in the structure of knowledge.
 - D. Writing enables organization on a large scale. Economic and administrative functions and responsibilities can be organized.
 - E. Similarly, abstract ideas, the product of reflection and reconsideration, can be recorded. In the emerging literature of the area, especially in the realm of myth and legend, we see abstract ideas made concrete. We also see how description and narration can influence the development and evolution of ideas.
- VIII. New research has traced the history of the cuneiform script to a gradual process. Syllabic signs were preceded by the use of small ceramic tokens, marked or decorated to distinguish their value and meaning.

Essential Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 31–41.

Cyrus Gordon, *Forgotten Scripts: The Story of Their Decipherment*, pp. 9–95.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 55–66.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does limited literacy effect social stratification?
2. The “writing revolution” enabled the emergence of highly organized human activities. Is the current computer revolution a parallel development?

Lecture Six

Literary and Religious Aspects of Myth

Scope: The definition of *myth* is notoriously difficult. This lecture surveys some of the more helpful definitions, then moves to literary issues. Unlike modern methods of storytelling, the methods of myth are fixed and exhibit little change. This lecture identifies some of these methods and illustrates them with examples from our texts. Method leads us to the question of meaning. The way in which ancient Near Eastern myths are told—slow-moving and repetitive, with only one narrative at a time—has led modern scholars to speculate on the functions of myth in the ancient societies that produced them. The discussion of the relationship between myth and ritual, a topic taken up by many modern theorists, centers on Near Eastern myths. The lecture concludes with an outline of the psychological approach to myth.

Outline

- I. In our introductory lecture, we discussed four approaches to the study of myth. Against the background of Lectures One through Five, let us return to these approaches and illustrate their applications by specific examples.
- II. Myth serves as ancient science: Stories explain natural and human phenomenon. In the absence of a theory of disease, medicine among the Assyrians and Babylonians was based on “restorative remedies” drawn from natural sources and magical practices referenced to supernatural powers. These two approaches were often fused; “the worm that causes toothache” attempts a naturalistic explanation for a painful phenomenon and, through an incantation, offers a cure.
- III. Myth records, reflects, and gives meaning to historical events:
 - A. We know of a Gilgamesh who ruled the Sumerian city-state of Uruk c. 2600 B.C. He was a great warrior, remembered for defending and fortifying his city.
 - B. Within a few centuries, his memory passed into legend. He was described as a child of the human and the divine, and episodes of his exploits were recorded by the Sumerians. These are short and somewhat formulaic accounts of the “life of the great hero.” These Sumerian legends are the first stage of the transformation of history into myth.
 - C. A thousand years after Gilgamesh’s reign, the successor civilization of the Akkadians produced a long, cohesive epic in which Gilgamesh was the central hero—but not the only one. Through this retelling, the Akkadians presented themselves as worthy successors of the heroic, semi-divine ruler. Thus, Gilgamesh, mythologized in his own Sumerian culture, serves as a cultural icon in a later culture.
- IV. A “myth and ritual” approach emphasizes the religious function of narrative.
 - A. Myths provide the words for rituals, which are the primary cultural phenomenon. The ritual, enacted regularly, ties the community together. For scholars of this school, myth is not viewed as a literary artifact, but as a product that enables the meaningful performance of a communal act.
 - B. The Psalms are seen by many modern readers of the Bible as poems of consolation or inspiration. They can be viewed as ritual texts for specific occasions (for example, dedication of the Temple). The specific images or cosmic events in the Psalms are references to the ritual.
 - C. We can see a similar relationship between text and ritual in Mesopotamian culture. The *Enuma Elish* (“when on high”), the Old Babylonian creation account, was read aloud, yearly, on the fourth day of the new year. It told of the struggles of the gods at the time of creation. Out of those struggles, the god Marduk arose triumphant. The enthronement of Marduk was the model for the yearly enthronement/reaffirmation of the king’s power, and this affirmation was the reason for the emergence of the *Enuma Elish*.
- V. The psychological approach was discussed by Freud and Jung.
 - A. Twentieth-century psychology (that of Freud and Jung) noted the similarities between the patterns of dreams and fantasies and those of ancient myths. Freud and Jung, schooled in the Greek and Roman classics, favored classical allusions.

- B.** Later theorists noted ancient Near Eastern of parallels. Jung emphasized the universality of specific images and traced them through various cultures.
1. For these psychologists, dreams are seen as symbolic language, from which the dreamer can learn about himself or herself. Thus, a personal mythology can emerge from reflection and analysis.
 2. Similarly, myths as communal expressions of the unconscious teach communities about themselves—they provide materials that help the community explain and present itself.
 3. Myths give meaning to life: World mythology relates the story of man's search for self-fulfillment in the face of entropy.
 4. The myth of Osiris, with its cycle of death and rebirth, helped the Egyptians, as a community and as individuals, to understand the inevitability of death and to integrate that understanding into a cyclical view. (We will study the Osiris myth in detail in Lecture Fourteen.)

Essential Reading:

Henrietta McCall, *Mesopotamian Myths*, pp. 74–78.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 209–216.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do we still use myth to explain unfamiliar phenomena?
2. Do you think the peoples of the ancient Near East had a psychological understanding of myth?

Lecture Seven

Ancient Near Eastern Myths and the Bible

Scope: In the mid-19th century, the reading public in Europe and the United States was confronted with the publication of recently deciphered documents from the ancient Near East. As they read Mesopotamian and Egyptian accounts of creation, a universal flood, and a final day of judgment, many people began to question the originality and authenticity of the biblical narratives to which these stories seemed so similar. New methods of biblical criticism posited a multi-authored text and suggested that it was influenced by earlier myths. This lecture describes the various responses, both religious and secular, to this crisis of belief. Responses ranged from a complete rejection of the findings of archaeology and decipherment to various strategies of accommodation with the new scientific findings.

Outline

- I. Four challenges to biblical authority and historicity presented themselves in the mid-19th century.
 - A. Geology: Scientific work on the age of the earth's crust challenged the Genesis chronology, according to which the earth was but a few thousand years old. This challenge was first articulated in the 1830s.
 - B. Evolution: The 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and its profound influence, challenged the biblical account of the creation of man.
 - C. Biblical criticism: This was first articulated by German Protestant scholars in the early 19th century, who posited the *documentary hypothesis*; that is, that the five books of Moses represented a composite work based on early documents redacted by a later editor. To illustrate, note that the two creation accounts in Genesis are from two distinct traditions, later joined.
 - D. The discovery and decipherment of ancient Near Eastern texts: As these stories were published, the public became fascinated with their similarity to biblical narratives. The question of the Bible's "originality" arose, and with it, the question of the Bible's authority.
 - 1. Explorers and archaeologists, among them clergymen and other believing Christians, were drawn to sites and texts with a perceived biblical connection.
 - 2. Interest in the biblical past ensured an audience, and funding sources, for these explorers.
 - 3. The career of Sir Leonard Wooley, pioneer of Egyptian, Syro-Palestinian, and Mesopotamian archaeology, illustrates this appeal to public perceptions and interests.
 - 4. The challenge to the Bible was both from the deciphered texts and from other archaeological evidence that might clash with biblical accounts.
- II. Among the discovered ancient texts, the flood narratives had the greatest impact on moderns.
 - A. In a dramatic 1872 lecture, George Adam Smith addressed a British audience and announced the discovery of the "Babylonian Noah."
 - 1. His source was the 11th tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, unearthed in the excavations of Nineveh, near the city of Mosul in Iraq. The tablet tells of Utnapishtim, who survived the flood and gained immortality.
 - 2. Smith did not present this discovery as a refutation of biblical originality, but it was taken that way by many polemicists.
 - B. Creation accounts of the Sumerians and Babylonians, as later collected and codified in the *Enuma Elish*, showed some structural affinities with Genesis.
 - 1. As in Genesis, the separation of heaven and earth, and of the waters above and below, were key elements.
 - 2. Egyptian myths spoke of creation through speech, parallel to Genesis.
 - C. Tales of heroes also revealed biblical affinities.
 - 1. The account of Sargon of Akkad depicted this great ruler as emerging from obscurity and humble stock, hidden as a child, found, and raised by royalty.
 - 2. The similarity to the stories of Moses in Exodus were too striking to be ignored.

3. The Greek myths had similar stories, but it was the Near Eastern setting of Sargon's story that linked it in people's minds to the Bible.
 4. Perhaps, some scholars speculated, all mythologies were linked.
- III. A number of responses arose to these challenges to the "originality" of the biblical narratives.
- A. There was a denial of the antiquity and authenticity of the archaeological finds and of the texts. As archaeology grew more sophisticated and the "pottery clock" emerged as a reliable dating system, this challenge was weakened.
 - B. A more nuanced, subtle response arose that privileged the biblical text but did not dismiss the archaeological record. Rather, the record (artifacts, sites, and texts) was searched for evidence that could support events mentioned in the Bible.
 1. Thus, the very existence of places and peoples named in the Bible, such as Babylon and its King Nebuchadnezzar, proved the Bible to be "true."
 2. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this orientation toward *biblical archaeology* led to the importation to the United States of hundreds of artifacts and inscriptions from the ancient Near East.
 3. Museums, especially museums at American colleges, benefited. Examples include the massive Assyrian reliefs at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum. The University of Pennsylvania has one of the world's great collections of cuneiform tablets.
 - C. Another response was philosophical: Yes, there were affinities between biblical and Near Eastern myths, but these affinities were in structure and detail, not in "deep content." The Bible, the narrative of which is centered on a monotheistic deity, is ethically superior to the products of "pagan" cultures.
- IV. A chapter in the history of ideas that draws together these controversies and their disparate strands is the "Bible and Babel" controversy of the early 20th century.
- A. The controversy began with Fredrick Delitzsch's 1902 lectures to German academicians and royalty. He surveyed the preceding decades of challenge and response to the Bible and its Near Eastern affinities.
 - B. He attacked the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as culturally inferior to the parallel Near Eastern texts, reversing the ethical superiority argument.
 1. In his barbed criticism, he moved from the ancient to the modern.
 2. In Delitzsch's own time, there was a powerful negative reaction against his lectures among clergymen in Europe and the United States. For many of those clergymen, an attack on the Hebrew Bible was also an attack on Christian doctrine. Their response to the comparison with ancient Near Eastern myths was to emphasize the Hebrew Bible's "moral superiority."
 3. Many scholars saw Delitzsch's remarks as anti-Semitic.
 4. This century-old controversy stemming from his lectures reverberates to this day.

Essential Reading:

Henrietta McCall, *Mesopotamian Myths*, pp. 9–16.

Edward Chiera, *They Wrote on Clay*, pp. 118–134.

Supplementary Reading:

Jack Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, pp. 95–106.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways is the American public conversation about science and religion similar to the debates of the 19th century? In what ways is it different?
2. In the age of TV and video, do museum exhibits still have an effect on public opinion and perception?

Lecture Eight

The Ancient Gods: Egypt and Mesopotamia

Scope: In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, the religious systems were based on the belief in many gods, each of which had its own sphere of authority or influence. This lecture discusses the process by which the emerging religions organized the gods into a pantheon, each with a distinct hierarchy and set of familial relationships. Manifestations of nature—the rivers, the stars, wild and domesticated animals—were divinely personified in ancient Near Eastern religions, and these manifestations were then directly worshipped. The gods were to be served, and elaborate systems of service arose to perpetuate their worship. Priesthoods were established to preserve the cultic rituals. The lecture highlights differences between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious systems and concludes with a presentation of some modern theories that offer explanations for those differences. These explanations illuminate Near Eastern concepts of divinity and the roles that the gods play in the respective myths of each culture.

Outline

- I. In the Old Kingdom, the government and religion of Egypt achieved a stability unequalled in the Mesopotamian city-states. Myth both reflected and shaped this stability. There was a fusion of politics and theology.
 - A. The idea of one supreme king over the whole land of the Nile had its expression in religious ideas. While alive, the pharaoh was a manifestation of the god Horus, the falcon god.
 1. At first a regional god in Upper Egypt, he was identified with the origins of kingship. The pharaoh would carry a *Horus name*. As the system of belief was organized over time, the Horus idea was extended to include Osiris, Isis, and Seth.
 2. Osiris is first known in a regional connection, in the Nile Delta—he is depicted as wrapped for mummification. The pharaoh's predecessor, on his death, has "become Osiris," and the pharaoh himself will achieve the same apotheosis. The succession of kings is, thus, the repeated succession of the gods; stability is divinely ordained.
 3. Isis is the goddess of kingship; her name may be translated as "throne." She is wife and sister to Osiris. She and Osiris ruled Egypt until challenged by Seth. Horus is the son of Isis and Osiris.
 4. Seth is the god of chaos and disorder; he is identified with the Semitic god Baal. He battles with Osiris, defeats, and kills him. Isis miraculously revives Osiris, to the extent that he impregnates her, but he remains the god of the dead. Horus is the child of this pregnancy.
 5. With Osiris dead, Horus and Seth contend for the rule of Egypt. Order and disorder go to war. Horus prevails, and with Isis and the other gods, establishes Osiris as god of the dead and of fertility (the "death and birth" of grain). The Nile is "the tears of Isis," wept as she mourns for Osiris.
 6. In Egyptian coronation ceremonies, the pharaoh is crowned as Horus, tying together divinity and kingship.
 - B. In Egypt, more than one myth system is operating at any given time. Kingship was also situated in the myths of the sun god, Ra.
 - C. Ra is also called "Horus of the Horizon." In creation myths (discussed in Lecture Ten), we will study his role as primary creator of the world. In early Egyptian history, the pharaoh's primary identification is with Horus.
 1. In the Pyramid Age, the ruler was identified with the sun. The icon for combining the Ra idea with the Horus idea was the winged sun disk.
 2. Ra plays a part in the resurrection of Osiris and his elevation to king of the underworld.
 3. By the Middle Kingdom, Ra is understood to be directly involved in the lives of all humans, not only in the life and death of royalty.
 4. Ra judges humans after their deaths. He is assisted by Maat, goddess of truth, whose symbol is a feather.
 5. Ra is the sun who emerges as the scarab beetle on the eastern horizon. He moves across the sky, lifted by the cosmic sea. At night, he is swallowed by the sky goddess Nut, who gives birth to him each dawn.
 6. The god Ptah is associated with creation through speech.

- II. In the Mesopotamian city-states, the rulers were considered divinely appointed and inspired but were not themselves considered gods. There was no parallel to the Egyptian monolithic view of the relationship between kingship and the divine.
- A. Gods were associated with cities. They represented natural forces, such as Haddad, the storm god. Over the late fourth and early third millennia, these disparate deities were seen as members of a pantheon.
 - B. The inhabitants of any given city were the servants of its god; they had been created to serve him.
 - 1. Enlil is associated with creation epic. Worshipped in Nippur, he is credited with separation and organization of the earth and the heavens. He rules heaven *and* earth.
 - 2. Ea, also known as Enki, is god of “the ocean of the deep.” When the other gods threaten the destruction of humankind, he comes to their aid. His cultic center was at Eridu.
 - 3. Anu, as ruler of the “topmost heaven,” is “father” of Enlil and Enki. He is a distant, removed god who doesn’t interfere in the affairs of humankind.
 - 4. Ninhursag, the “mother of the gods,” is the sister of Enlil, separator and creator of heaven and earth. Ea impregnates Ninhursag, then rapes their daughter. Subsequent children of Ninhursag and Ea act benevolently toward humans.
 - 5. Inanna is known in Akkadian as Ishtar. Associated with the planet Venus, she is the goddess of war and sexual activity. Her sacred animal was the lion, and one of her many cities was Uruk (or Warka), where Gilgamesh ruled as king. Dumuzi (or Tammuz) is her spouse and, ultimately, her victim.
 - 6. Marduk, son of Ea (Enki), is the god of Babylon. In the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic we will study in Lecture Eleven, Marduk is elevated above all the gods. This symbolizes the great power of Babylon over the other Mesopotamian city-states.
- III. The gods were organized in pantheons in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, but in keeping with the greater administrative and cultic centralization of Egypt, the kings there were more directly related to the divine. The king, on accession, became the divine Horus and, at death, became the divine Osiris. In Mesopotamia, the local ruler, even if he ruled over many city-states and foreign lands, was thought of as a representative of divinity, not as the direct manifestation of the divine.

Essential Reading:

Rosalie David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 101–113.

Jack Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. III, pp. 1857–1870.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 201–231.

Questions to Consider:

1. Is there a relationship between social stability and the “divine kingship” concept?
2. What factors might account for the differences between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious systems?

Lecture Nine

The Ancient Gods: Syria/Canaan

Scope: In Syria and Canaan, the intellectual and commercial crossroads of the Near East, religious ideas were influenced by the “superpower” cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Despite this influence, distinctive regional understandings of divinity and forms of worship arose. The Hebrew Bible makes negative reference to Canaanite religion. This lecture highlights those concepts and names that constitute a vocabulary shared by both Canaanite and biblical religion. These include divine names, such as El and Baal; place names of cities and towns in ancient Israel; and ideas of sacred space and time. A knowledge of this shared vocabulary aids our understanding of the historical context in which biblical religion emerged, because the Bible demonstrates both a sense of continuity with its Near Eastern past and a radical break with that same past.

Outline

- I. The religious system and pantheon of the Canaanites were less complex than that of the Mesopotamian civilizations.
 - A. In Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon the gods represented and mirrored the complexity of society. In addition, natural forces were explained and personified in the “personalities” of the gods.
 - B. The Canaanite gods were fewer and understood to be more directly involved in the lives of their worshippers. The worshippers’ main aim in serving the gods was to propitiate them.
 - C. In our survey of Canaanite culture (Lecture Three), we noted that Canaan was an area often dominated by one of the great powers or one of the dominant city-states, such as Ebla and Ugarit. Much of what we know of Canaanite religion stems from two sources: the Bible and archaeology.
 1. The Hebrew Bible condemns the “idolatry” of the Canaanites and warns the Israelites against “ensnarement” in pagan practices. This portrait is, by its nature, negative.
 2. Archaeology involves the study of material culture and mythological texts. In contrast to the biblical condemnation of Canaanite religion, these texts privilege a variegated, polytheistic view of human-divine interaction.
- II. Our focus in this lecture is on the biblical and post-biblical portrayal of the Canaanite gods and of their worship. Lecture Eleven will survey their description in the texts of the Canaanites themselves.
 - A. These two sets of sources, the biblical and the archaeological, offer stark contrasts—the first, condemnatory; the second, affirming. Reference to both sources yields a complex view, one more literary than theological.
 - B. We will focus on two deities, Baal and Asherah.
- III. In the Hebrew Bible, we find many references to the Canaanite deity Baal.
 - A. He appears in place names, such as in Baal-Perazim of II Samuel 5:20, and the worship of this god is mentioned and condemned many times in the Bible.
 - B. In the Pentateuch (“five books” of Moses) some Israelites worship the Baal of Baal Peor (Numbers 25), for which they are killed.
 - C. During the period of the Judges, when “there was no king in Israel and each person did what was right in his own eyes,” Baal worship flourished. The dramatic story of Gideon, one of the heroes of the Book of Judges, relates that his father built an altar to Baal, which Gideon was commanded to destroy. He was further commanded by God to “cut down the Asherah that is near it” (Judges 6:28).
- IV. In the Book of Kings, we read of the prophet Elijah’s contest with the priests of Baal. These priests are supported by King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, Elijah’s archenemies. Though Ahab and Jezebel fall from power and the Baal priesthood is disgraced, Baal worship persisted through the Israelite and Judean monarchies.
 - A. Before the archaeological discoveries at Ras Shamra, the Syrian site of ancient Ugarit, the biblical depiction of Baal was taken by many historians to be a reference to local gods that had the word *Baal*

(Hebrew, “owner,” “master”) in their divine names. The Ugaritic texts show us that Baal was a major deity, god of fertility and of storms, who had local, particular manifestations.

- B. The local shrine to Baal was often on a mountain.
 - 1. The story of Elijah and the priests of Baal takes place on Mount Carmel.
 - 2. The 450 priests of Baal offer a sacrifice on the altar and proceed to “cut themselves with swords and lances, till the blood gushed out of them.” But their god did not answer them.
 - 3. Elijah, also offering a sacrifice, is answered by the God of Israel.
 - 4. When the people are convinced by this miracle, Elijah kills the priests of Baal in the brook Kishon.
- C. The “curious institution” of sacred prostitution is associated with Baal worship. This is thought to be a reference to Canaanite fertility rites practiced in the “high places.”
 - 1. In the reforms of King Josiah (related in II Kings 23), we have a rich description of Canaanite religion as the biblical authors saw it (verses 4–20).
 - 2. The issue here is that the Judeans were worshipping the Canaanite gods.
 - 3. Here, too, there is a reference to Asherah. Who or what was Asherah?
- V. In the Ugaritic texts, Asherah is a goddess and the consort of El, the head of the pantheon, and thus, mother of the gods. Before the decipherment of the Ugaritic texts, the biblical references to Asherah were puzzling.
 - A. Recall Judges 6:28, in which Gideon, destroying the altar of Baal “cut down the Asherah.” The Ugaritic texts make it clear that what was erected and cut down was a symbol of the goddess, a wooden cult object.
 - B. In King Josiah’s reform, we read that the king “brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord...and burned it at the brook Kidron.”
 - C. Many of the classical translations, both Jewish and Christian, render *Asherah* as “sacred grove.” Today, some scholars confirm this ancient view—that Asherah was a growing tree or grove of trees planted in honor of the goddess. The Ugaritic material makes it clear that “Asherah” meant both the goddess and the form in which the goddess was worshipped—her cult symbol.
 - D. Asherah is identified by some scholars as the Canaanite form of the mother goddess of antiquity.

Essential Reading:

Michael Coogan, *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, pp. 68–77.

James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, pp. 93–118.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 18–24.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Is *idolatry* an absolute or relative term?
- 2. What is the “lesson” of the story of Elijah and the priests of Baal?

Lecture Ten

The Creation Myths of Egypt and Mesopotamia

Scope: Creation epics of both cultures were framed as stories of the struggle between order and chaos. The depiction of creation in Genesis, in which the “earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep,” captures the essence of the ancient view of the origins of the earth. As this lecture demonstrates, the Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths, unlike the biblical account, present origin stories in which many gods, not the one God, engage in creation. In these accounts, the gods often struggle violently among themselves. In the Egyptian *Memphite theology*, the god Ptah, god of Memphis, created all the other gods. Ptah himself, however, was not transcendent, like the God of the Hebrew Bible, but understood to be immanent in the natural world. The Egyptian pharaoh, as a manifestation of the god Horus, was closely linked with Ptah. In the Mesopotamian cultures of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the *Enuma Elish*, or “epic of creation,” was a text recited at the new year. The gods who created the world were praised for granting kingship to the rulers of the Land of the Two Rivers. Thus, theology and politics were linked in a manner that ensured the stability of the state and buttressed the power of the religious authorities.

Outline

- I. In the two previous lectures, we surveyed the stories of the gods and their organization into pantheons.
 - A. These gods and groups of gods appear in creation stories.
 - B. These are representative of multiple and conflicting accounts of the creation of the world and humanity. There is no effort at consistency, either within the accounts or across them, from story to story.
 - C. Many biblical scholars discern a similar situation in the creation account in Genesis, in which they see two differing stories of human origins in the first two chapters.
- II. What the Egyptian Memphite theology shares with the biblical account is the idea of creation through the divine word.
 - A. We have an almost complete form of this text from the eighth century B.C.; it is considered a late version of a text from the second millennium B.C.
 - B. In our discussion of the development of writing, we explored the relationship among thinking, writing, and organization.
 - C. On a theological level, this myth expresses a similar set of ideas about creation. The god Ptah can create the world because he has conceptualized it in words. Once he has a word-bound plan, he can bring the world into being.
 - D. The Egyptians termed the conceptualization the *heart* of the god and called the speech act that created the world the *tongue* of the god.
 - E. The text moves between the abstract and the concrete:

Thus it happened that the heart and tongue of Ptah gained control over all of the body. Ptah is in every body and every mouth of all gods, men, cattle and creeping thing. The nine gods were formed through his heart and tongue. It was said of Ptah: He who made all and brought the gods into being. Ptah also brought cities and temples into being. He assigned the gods to their cities.
 - F. But oddly, this text and others that we have do not directly address the question of how human beings were created. In later texts, we have references to creation from the tears of the god Ra. This may be a reference to a lost myth. Further references to creation are found in Egyptian myths of destruction. In *The Book of the Cow of Heaven*, there is one such story, which we will study in Lecture Fourteen.
- III. The most elaborate and detailed creation account from Mesopotamia is the *Enuma Elish* (“when on high”).
 - A. The world is formed out of struggle between order and chaos
 - B. *Enuma Elish* opens with the story of the creation of the gods by Apsu, “the begetter”:

Before the heavens or earth were named,

There was Apsu the first, the begetter,
And the goddess Tiamat, who gave birth to them all.
These two mingled their waters together.

- C. The names of these two gods are the names of “the two waters”: Apsu—the waters that lie under the earth; Tiamat—the sea that lies above.
 - D. The myth has these two forces in sexual conjunction. Pairs of lesser gods are born of this union. The first pair represents the heavens and the earth; others represent other forces of nature.
- IV. A genealogy of the gods follows. At the point where the god Marduk emerges as the champion of the younger gods, an epic battle breaks out. Marduk battles Tiamat, who as goddess of the sea, symbolizes formlessness and chaos. She is aided by her cosmic allies, who are under the command of her general, Kingu.
- A. Victorious in his struggle, Marduk dismembers Tiamat.

Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life;
He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.
After he had slain Tiamat, the leader,
Her band was shattered, her troupe broken up.
 - B. Kingu, Tiamat’s general, is executed. Marduk orders the god Ea to use Kingu’s blood to make humans.

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage; man shall be his name.
Savage-man I will create.
He will be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease.
 - C. Here we encounter an idea central to many Mesopotamian myths, that humans were created to serve the gods. Human service of the gods, in the form of sacrificial offerings, is the theme of the latter part of the epic.
- V. This epic, the *Enuma Elish*, was read as part of the liturgy of the Akitu festival, the Babylonian new year.
- A. It marks the triumph of order over chaos, tells of the origins of humanity, and teaches that the purpose of humankind is the service of the gods.
 - B. These two myths, the Egyptian Memphite theology and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, provide insights into the foundational ideas of the societies that produced them. They are both told in vivid fashion and have high literary, as well as historical, value.
 - C. They also serve to remind us that creation accounts of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians are embedded in the descriptions of the gods of the pantheon: in Egypt, in the description of Ptah, who assigns gods to their cities; in Mesopotamia, in the description of Marduk, who battles Tiamat, the force of chaos.
 - D. We can contrast these myths with the biblical account of the creation that opens the Hebrew Bible. Here, it is in two forms, but they represent the only account in the text. In ancient Near Eastern mythology, on the other hand, there is a multiplicity of accounts.

Essential Reading:

James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, pp. 31–39.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 216–225.

Questions to Consider:

1. What do creation accounts reveal about a culture?
2. Can we apply a “myth and ritual” approach to the use of creation accounts?

Lecture Eleven

Epics of the Gods: Syria/Canaan

Scope: Inhabitants of Syria and Canaan absorbed many of their religious ideas from their more powerful neighbors, but the literary form in which they cast these ideas, the *Epics of the gods*, was unique to their region. This lecture describes these epics, beginning with those of Ugarit in the late second millennium B.C. El, Baal, and Asherah were the heads of this pantheon, and their interactions and exploits were depicted as passionate and vengeful. The tablets on which these epics were recorded were discovered in the 1920s and 1930s, and they revolutionized the study of the Bible's literary antecedents. They also illuminate a controversy regarding the Israelite understanding of the Baal cult.

Outline

- I. In Canaanite culture, there was a pantheon of gods, whose organization and iconography absorbed influences from both the Egyptian and Mesopotamian spheres.
 - A. In the northern reaches of Canaan, the city of Ugarit played a pivotal role as cultural connector and disseminator. The city flourished between the 14th and 11th centuries B.C.
 - B. The archaeological site of Ugarit, in Syria, was discovered by a peasant plowing his fields; it was excavated by French archaeologists from 1929 into the 1950s.
 - C. In addition to Ugarit, there were other “accidental” discoveries in Near Eastern archaeology:
 1. The Amarna letters were discovered by a peasant woman in 1887; we will study these in a later lecture.
 2. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by a Bedouin shepherd in 1947.
 3. These three discoveries of documents, in 1887, 1929, and 1947, revolutionized Near Eastern studies. Each discovery revealed documents that indicated previously unconsidered connections among culture areas.
 - D. Ugarit, through its archives, was revealed as a sophisticated international trading center.
 1. Its scribes and priests produced a large collection of myths.
 2. These myths, along with other documents in the archives, revealed Ugarit's strong connections to Egypt, Assyria, the Hittites, and the Greeks.
 3. The archives held texts in eight languages. The scribes of Ugarit were truly multilingual.
 4. Most significantly for tracing the history of writing, Ugarit had the first known alphabet. Soon afterwards, the Phoenicians would improve the alphabetic system and spread it throughout the Mediterranean world.
- II. In the *Epic of the Gods*, El was the head of the pantheon. Asherah was his consort. Among their many progeny was Baal.
 - A. God of fertility, and of the rain on which fertility depends, Baal usurps the position of the “father god.”
 1. El remains among the gods but retreats from the impending “war in heaven.”
 2. In this war, Baal is challenged by Yamm, dragon of the sea. Astarte, one of Baal's consorts, tries to dissuade Yamm from engaging in war, but he will agree to cease hostilities only if she leaves Baal and gives herself to him.
 3. Baal is enraged by Yamm's behavior and hostilities begin.
 4. Astarte employs the divine craftsman Kothar to make weapons that will kill the dragon. Baal attacks the dragon and leaves him for dead.
 5. Here, the goddess Anat, goddess of war and love, comes to Baal's aid. She realizes that Yamm was not yet dead. Using the arts of war, she dispatches him. (Anat's exploits will concern us again when we study tales of death, destruction, and disorder in Lectures Fourteen and Fifteen.)
 6. Baal is established as king of the gods, but his kingdom is not secure. He is threatened by Mot, god of drought and its consequence, death.
 - B. We can understand this part of the myth as an explanatory tale of the threat posed by drought to crops and, by extension, to life.

1. In contrast to Egypt, whose fertility came from the Nile (“Egypt is the gift of the Nile”), and to Mesopotamia, where the Tigris and Euphrates are used for irrigation, Canaan was dependent on rain. Reliable rainfall or drought was a matter of life and death, which explains the mythic expression of the concern over drought.
 2. Mot threatens Baal’s palace and kingdom: “Baal sits on his throne in heaven while I am imprisoned below. I dare him to come to the netherworld.”
 3. Baal visits the netherworld and is captured in the land of the dead. Crops wither as drought persists.
 4. Anat retrieves Baal’s corpse. Through the intercession of El, Baal is brought back to life.
 5. With his return to kingship, the earth again comes to life. Mot, god of death and drought, cannot be conquered, but he is vanquished temporarily. He recognizes that Baal is king.
- C. The theme of the dying and resurrected god is understood by many scholars of myth to be an explanatory myth of the natural cycle of rain and drought. But there is a tendency to see the “dying god” theme in places where it is not explicitly mentioned. Here, it is quite explicit, but we should not limit its interpretation to the realm of earth’s natural cycles.
- D. Biblical references to Baal link Baal worship with sexual transgression and the fertility cult.
- E. They also indicate that Baal worship was widespread in certain periods of Israelite history, and we can assume that along with the worship, there was a knowledge of the epics in which these gods were featured.
- F. The picture we get from these biblical passages is that worship of the Canaanite deities was a temptation, one to be resisted and one that the Hebrew prophets continually condemned.
- G. There is a debate among historians of religion as to how accurate the biblical picture of Israelite idolatry is. Were there tendencies to worship Baal at the high places? Was this worship expressed in sexual rituals? Did worshippers flagellate themselves and draw blood? Is the prophetic condemnation an exaggeration and a warning? There is evidence supporting both points of view.
- III. Other aspects of this cycle include the psychological and the political.**
- A. In the psychological, we have the death of hope and the encounter with the netherworld of melancholy and depression but also the possibility of revival and return to life.
- B. In political terms, Ugarit particularly, and Near Eastern city-states more generally, represented kingship as an appointment by the gods.
1. The epics of the gods and the struggles of kings mirrored each other.
 2. We can read the Ugaritic *Epic of the Gods* as a political-theological statement. The ruler who emerges victorious in a struggle with rivals has triumphed over death, and his victory both mirrors divine victory and is shaped by it.

Essential Reading:

James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, pp. 93–132.

Supplementary Reading:

Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, pp. 88–95.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the relationship between multilingualism and cultural sophistication?
2. What is the cultural meaning of structuring the pantheon as a family?

Lecture Twelve

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Part One

Scope: Lectures Twelve and Thirteen tell the story of Gilgamesh. Lecture Twelve opens with a detailed description of both the history of the epic and the story of the archaeological discoveries and decipherment that enabled modern scholars to piece together the fragments of “the world’s oldest tale.” Gilgamesh was a historical king who ruled the Sumerian city-state of Uruk c. 2600 B.C. In the century after his death, his memory was transformed into myth. He was mythologized as a divine ruler, master builder, and fearless warrior. His story was recorded in a series of Sumerian epic poems. A thousand years later, the epic, which by then incorporated tales of Gilgamesh’s wisdom, was known throughout the Near East. Its widespread appeal was twofold. First and foremost, it was a great tale of adventure in which the gods, humans, monsters, and animals are all players. It was also a story that addressed, in mythic form, the most basic human issues: friendship, loyalty, sexual attraction and repulsion, the ties between parents and children, and the inevitability and finality of death. The lecture concludes with a retelling of the first half of the epic—from the description of Gilgamesh’s kingship to the death of his companion Enkidu.

Outline

- I. The discoveries that enabled the reconstruction of the epic in its 12 parts took place in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - A. Sumerian tablets from the third millennium B.C. relate episodes of what will later, in the Babylonian texts, appear as a long epic poem. These episodes include the battle with the monster Humbaba and the descent of Enkidu into the underworld.
 - B. Babylonian tablets from the first millennium B.C., unearthed in the excavations at Nineveh, yielded a good part of the epic.
 - C. From the mid-19th century to the early 20th, other fragments were uncovered. In total, we have 3,000 lines of the epic.
 - D. Pictorial evidence, on cylinder seals and in statuary, seems to refer to the epic. This evidence is said to depict the “Gilgamesh figure.”
- II. Gilgamesh, as a historical figure, ruled in the city of Warka or Uruk (the biblical Erech) in approximately 2600 B.C.
 - A. At that time, there was conflict between the Sumerian city-states.
 - B. Gilgamesh was known for building and fortifying the city walls.
 - C. Gilgamesh’s name appears in the Sumerian king lists, where he is said to have lived to the age of 126.
- III. The strongest response to the publication of the epic was to the Flood Tablet.
 - A. The tablets excavated at Nineveh included that part of the epic that tells of a universal flood. It is narrated by Utnapishtim, the one man who survived the deluge. Scholars refer to him as the “Babylonian Noah.” In December 1872, George Smith’s London lecture on this flood account electrified the public. Here was a flood account that paralleled and seemed to precede the story of Noah. Public interest led to further excavations and discoveries of other sections of the epic.
 - B. In January 1902, Friedrich Delitzsch delivered the “*Babel und Bibel*” lecture in Berlin. This lecture had a similar wide-ranging effect. It focused on the flood section of *Gilgamesh* and on other Babylonian parallels to Genesis.
 - C. In the 20th century, there have been a number of literary and philosophical reflections on *Gilgamesh*: “*Gilgamesh* is a kind of touchstone to other more ‘modern’ works. It reminds us of many stories in the Bible and episodes in Homer that are part of our cultural consciousness” (Herbert Mason). “*Gilgamesh* is a revolt against death” (Thorkild Jacobsen).

IV. We continue with the narrative, from Gilgamesh's kingship to the death of Enkidu.

- A.** The Prologue praises Gilgamesh's kingship, strength, and dignity, as well as the walls of Uruk, "the like of which no king, no man, will ever build." The Prologue also praises Gilgamesh as the author "who chiseled his toils on stone."
- B.** Gilgamesh is oppressing the people of his city. Forms of oppression include "the right of seniority." Enkidu is created to free the people from Gilgamesh's cruelty. We are told how Enkidu is brought into civilization through his relationship with the harlot Shamhat. Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet, challenge each other, and become devoted friends.
- C.** We are introduced to the monster Humbaba and the decision of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to fight it. The narrative continues with the intervention of the god Shamash and the struggle against the monster. Together, the two heroes slay the great monster, resulting in dire consequences.
- D.** In the narrative about Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven, the goddess Ishtar desires Gilgamesh. Spurned by Gilgamesh, Ishtar persuades Anu to send the Bull of Heaven to fight the heroes. Enkidu and Gilgamesh kill the Bull, angering the gods. They want Enkidu and Gilgamesh to die for killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.
- E.** Enkidu has a dream in which the gods, angered by the slaughter of the Bull of Heaven, debate which of the two heroes bears responsibility for its death. They decide that Gilgamesh must die because he cut down the sacred cedar in Humbaba's forest.
- F.** The god Shamash intercedes for Gilgamesh, but Enkidu must die. Cursed by Shamash, Enkidu must descend to the netherworld. Gilgamesh is inconsolable and, from then on, is burdened by the question of whether there is any escape from death.

Essential Reading:

Henrietta McCall, *Mesopotamian Myths*, pp. 38–51.

Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 39–152.

Herbert Mason, *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*, pp. 11–50.

Supplementary Reading:

David Ferry, *Gilgamesh*, pp. 3–47.

Questions to Consider:

1. Can you see parallels to Gilgamesh in other hero narratives?
2. What are the consequences of the close friendship forged between Enkidu and Gilgamesh?

Timeline

- 3500–3000 B.C. Development of writing systems and urban culture in Egypt and Mesopotamia.
- 2700–2400 B.C. Pyramid Age in Egypt and Sumerian city-states in Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh, Sargon of Akkad as historical figures.
- 1500–1200 B.C. Hittite power in Anatolia; Ugarit flourishes. New Kingdom in Egypt and Amarna age (14th century).
- 1250 B.C. Estimated date for the Exodus from Egypt.
- 1000–930 B.C. United monarchy of Israel.
- 930–722 B.C. Divided monarchy: Israel/Judah.
- 586 B.C. Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.

Glossary

Amarna letters: Correspondence from the 14th century B.C. between the Egyptian royal court and the courts of Middle Eastern vassals and monarchs.

Cuneiform: The script used in the writing systems of the Mesopotamian civilizations. The signs were made with a stylus and incised in clay.

Enuma Elish: An epic poem recited on the Babylonian new year. It contains references to a creation account.

Instruction texts: Egyptian collections of wisdom sayings, often presented as instructions from father to son or a king to his subjects.

Memphite theology: A creation account originating in the Egyptian priesthood of Memphis.

Neolithic Revolution: Occurred c. 6000 in the ancient Near East; the transition from hunter/gatherer subsistence to settlement reliant on agriculture.

Tell: A mound formed by successive habitation over the centuries.

Theodicy: A text that vindicates divine justice.

Biographical Notes

Akhenaten: Egyptian king of the 14th century B.C., known as the “heretic pharaoh.”

Enheduanna: Daughter of Sargon of Akkad, priestess and poet of the mid-third millennium B.C.

Enkidu: Gilgamesh’s companion. On his death, Gilgamesh is inconsolable.

Gilgamesh: King of Uruk (26th century B.C.); later, a figure of myth, hero of a great epic poem that developed in successive Mesopotamian cultures.

Hammurabi: Ruler of Babylon (18th century B.C.); promulgated a famous law code.

Menes: Egyptian ruler (c. 3000 B.C.) identified with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Nefertiti: Queen of Egypt, spouse of Akhenaten; identified with ideal beauty.

Sargon of Akkad: Mesopotamian ruler (24th century B.C.), whose name became synonymous with the idea of empire.

Sumerians: In southern Iraq c. 3000 B.C., the people and rulers of the first city-states and the originators of writing.

Telepinu: A Hittite god associated with the cycles of death and rebirth.

Utnapishtim: The “Noah” figure in the Gilgamesh epic, also known as Atrahasis.

Gods of Mesopotamia:

Anu: “Heaven god,” removed from humankind.

Ea (Enki): God of the oceans of the deep, aids humankind.

Enlil: Associated with creation.

Inanna: Sumerian goddess of love and war; known in Akkadian as Ishtar.

Marduk: Babylonian god, Ea’s son; he is a younger god who emerges victorious from a struggle with the forces of chaos.

Gods of Canaan:

Anat: Canaanite goddess of war.

Asherah: Goddess; consort of El; associated with the “sacred grove.”

Baal: Son of El; through struggle, becomes the chief god.

El: Head of the pantheon.

Gods of Egypt:

Horus: The falcon god of kingship.

Isis: Wife/sister of Horus.

Nut: Egyptian sky goddess. She gives birth to the sun each dawn.

Osiris: God of the dead; the deceased pharaoh “becomes Osiris.”

Ptah: Egyptian god associated with the city of Memphis.

Seth: God of chaos; battles both Osiris and Horus.

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Internet Resources:

- The Ancient History Source Book, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook.html (for ancient texts).
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, Near Eastern Collection, www.metmuseum.org (for information on artifacts and archaeology).
- University of Chicago, Oriental Institute, www.-oi.uchicago.edu (for information on artifacts and archaeology).

Ancient Near Eastern Mythology

Part II

Professor Shalom L. Goldman



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At Emory, he teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in Middle Eastern Studies and conducts a graduate seminar in the program in Comparative Literature.

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Ancient Near Eastern Mythology

Scope:

This series of 24 lectures introduces the student to the great myths of the ancient Near East. Humankind's first recorded myths and legends were the product of the area long known as the "cradle of civilization," the region bound by Egypt and the Mediterranean in the west, Iran in the east, Anatolia in the north, and the Arabian Peninsula in the south. With the development of city-states in the late fourth millennium B.C., a number of sophisticated cultures emerged.

Lecture One introduces the major themes and overall plan of the course and gives the student a sense of the present-day study of the topic. Lectures Two and Three provide a historical survey of the major cultures of the ancient Near Eastern world. Lecture Two focuses on Mesopotamia and Egypt; Lecture Three, on the Hittites and the Canaanites. Each lecture emphasizes the strong links among geography, politics, and religious ideas.

Lectures Four and Five trace the development of Near Eastern archaeology and decipherment. These sciences enabled modern scholars to reconstruct, interpret, and contextualize the foundational stories of the ancient world. The remarkable history of the development of writing is recounted, because the history of writing is tied directly to the history of myth. Among the first recorded documents were stories of gods, humans, animals, and spirit-beings. Reading them today, we enrich our understanding of the origins of civilization. For many modern readers, these stories not only serve as keys to the past, but they also give meaning to the present and the future.

This question of the "meaning of myth" and its notoriously difficult definition is examined in Lectures Six and Seven. Many 19th- and 20th-century scholars of religion, philosophy, and literature have engaged these questions. In what sense are myths "true" or "untrue"? What is the relationship between religion and myth? And what part does ritual play in the expression of mythic ideas? Are myths an explanation for otherwise unexplained phenomena? Or are they expressions of commonly shared human dreams and yearnings? In relation to the question of myth, Lecture Seven discusses the "Bible and Babel" issue. The Hebrew Bible is a product of this same Near Eastern cradle of civilization, and many of its early narratives are strikingly similar to ancient Near Eastern myths. Among these are accounts of creation, records of a universal flood, and biographies of divinely inspired heroes. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the decipherment and publication of ancient myths, especially those of Babylon (hence the term "Bible and Babel"), caused great consternation in many circles, because the publication of myths parallel to biblical stories was perceived as a threat to organized religion. Conversely, a movement arose that sought in archaeology and decipherment a confirmation of the "biblical truth."

The subsequent lectures (Eight through Twenty-Four) provide detailed examinations of individual Near Eastern myths. Each story is presented in its specific cultural context; though there were shared cultural values in the wider Near Eastern sphere, the stories reveal their richness only when the local cultural nuances are revealed. The lectures are grouped thematically. We begin with the pantheons of the gods (Lectures Eight and Nine), then move to tales of creation and the exploits of the gods (Lectures Ten and Eleven). Lectures Twelve and Thirteen recount the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and describe the discovery and decipherment of that epic.

Lectures Fourteen through Twenty-Four continue this thematic approach. The threat of death, destruction, and disruption was a constant concern of ancient (and modern!) societies. Man's place in the social world, and woman's place—were they stable? Or might they be subject to violent change? Lectures Fourteen and Fifteen examine stories that attempted to answer these questions. Lectures Sixteen and Seventeen focus on texts that reflect the relationship between society and the individual. These include relationships defined and regulated by legal texts, such as the famous Code of Hammurabi, and narrative texts, such as the Egyptian "Tale of the Eloquent Peasant."

Relations between the sexes and the social arrangements governing those arrangements inform the tales told in Lectures Eighteen and Nineteen. In the strictly hierarchical societies of the Near East, the rules governing the conduct of commoners and those governing the conduct of royalty and the priesthood were markedly different. Lectures Twenty and Twenty-One tell of the adventures of kings, queens, and priests. Great poems, hymns, and other works of art were attributed to rulers and religious visionaries. In Lectures Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three, we read and interpret some of their artistic creations, including the great "Hymn to the Sun" of the Pharaoh Akhenaten. The series closes with close readings of *wisdom literature*, stories and proverbs that attempt to answer humanity's oldest and deepest questions about the conduct and meaning of life.

The goal of the course is to introduce the myths of the ancient Near East to the modern reader, to trace the powerful influence of those myths on later cultures, and to encourage intellectual inquiry into the fascinating relationships among myth, religion, and literature.

Lecture Thirteen

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Part Two

Scope: Lecture Thirteen opens with a brief review of the first half of the epic, then moves to the narration of its second part. Gilgamesh, inconsolable after the death of Enkidu, memorializes his fallen companion in both poetry and sculpture. “Grief is in his innermost being,” and he roams the earth seeking the secret of eternal life. After many trials and adventures, Gilgamesh reaches the abode of Utnapishtim, the sole survivor of the great flood. The flood and its destructive force are described in great detail. Though Utnapishtim and his wife were granted immortality by the gods, such an exception to the fate of all humanity is no longer possible. Undeterred, Gilgamesh makes one more attempt, through magical means, to outwit the gods, but of course, he fails. Chastened and now wiser, he returns to his royal city of Uruk.

Outline

- I. In the previous lecture, we examined the historical and cultural background of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. We now move to the exciting conclusion of the tale.
 - A. Among the themes of the first part of the epic are the powerful friendship between the two heroes and the ability of friendship to modify behavior.
 - B. We see the latter theme when Gilgamesh ceases to oppress his people. We also see the relationship between sexuality and civilization when Enkidu is “made human” by his relationship with the harlot. These themes will be reinforced, and others will emerge, in this next part of the story.
 - C. Enkidu, condemned to death by the gods, descends to the underworld, from which there is no return. Gilgamesh waits a week, hoping his friend will awaken, then performs the funeral rites. Gilgamesh, consumed by grief, declares: “All day and night have I wept over him, and would not have him buried, as if my friend might yet rise up at my loud cries.”
- II. The narrative continues with Gilgamesh’s journey to Utnapishtim.
 - A. Hearing of the one man who escaped death and achieved immortality, Gilgamesh sets out to learn his secret. A series of adventures, in which he encounters fabulous creatures who attempt to dissuade him, leads him across the Waters of Death to Utnapishtim. The boatman Urshanabi takes Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim’s island.
 - B. Utnapishtim relates the story of the great flood. He emphasizes its uniqueness.
 1. The gods were to destroy humanity; Utnapishtim and his wife, together with animals they take aboard, survive on an ark.
 2. The flood lasts a week, and all living things are destroyed, except for the creatures on the ark.
 3. This will not happen again and is not a secret that is useful to Gilgamesh.
 4. Challenged to stay awake for a week, the duration of the flood, Gilgamesh makes the effort but fails: “Sleep breathed over him like a fog.”
 - C. Gilgamesh seems to be convinced of the futility of his search. Deeply disappointed, he is about to cross the Waters of Death and return to his kingdom, when Utnapishtim, as if to tantalize him, gives Gilgamesh a parting gift.
 1. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a plant that grows at the bottom of the sea. It is called “the old one becomes a child.” Gilgamesh plans to use it on his return to Uruk.
 2. Gilgamesh retrieves the plant in the course of his journey but loses it, while bathing, to the snake. From then on, the snake can renew itself; humans, of course, cannot.
 - D. Accompanied by the boatman Urshanabi, Gilgamesh makes his way back to Uruk. He has finally accepted that the quest for immortality is vain. “I shall give up,” he tells the boatman. As they near the city, Gilgamesh admires its walls, terraces, and brickwork, all of which he had built. His pride in the city, and in the civilization that it houses, is a sign of his acceptance of mortality.
- III. The epic has literary and philosophical implications.
 - A. Acceptance and weariness are the tones of the epic’s conclusion. Its final lines are: “From a far journey he returned; he was weary but at peace.”

- B.** A final tablet, which incorporates the earlier Sumerian poems into the Babylonian cycle, returns us to the theme of inconsolable loss.
1. In this text, Gilgamesh invokes magic to bring Enkidu back from the underworld. He eventually succeeds in bringing him back, but Enkidu cannot return to the real world of the living; he is now a fixture of the world of the dead.
 2. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh of the shadowy world of the irretrievably dead. This appendix adds a more somber, less optimistic, but yet life-affirming, tone to the conclusion of the tale.

Essential Reading:

Henrietta McCall, *Mesopotamian Myths*, pp. 38–51.

Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 39–152.

Herbert Mason, *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*, pp. 53–92.

Supplementary Reading:

David Ferry, *Gilgamesh*, pp. 47–99.

Questions to Consider:

1. Is the fear that humanity will be destroyed a potent force in modern cultures?
2. Why does Gilgamesh lose the magic plant?

Lecture Fourteen

Myths of Death and Destruction, Part One

Scope: This lecture is the first of two presentations on ancient Near Eastern responses to the threat of death and destruction. The first lecture recounts Egyptian and Mesopotamian responses. Fear of the possible annihilation of the human race, a possibility alluded to in the *Gilgamesh* epic, is reflected in an Egyptian text from the second millennium B.C., *The Deliverance of Mankind from Destruction*. There, the goddess Hathor, in her vengeful aspect, wishes to prevail over mankind. She is stopped by Ra, father of the gods, who employs a ruse to intoxicate her and deflect her from her destructive path. The death of the individual and the destruction of humanity were understood to be connected in a mythic manner. We see this in both the Flood Tablet of the *Gilgamesh* epic and in this Egyptian text. We will also look at how the Flood Tablet is similar to the Noah story in Genesis.

Outline

- I. In our lecture on creation myths (Lecture Ten), we noted that Egyptian myths tell of the creation of the cosmos and the pantheon; they don't directly relate the story of the creation of humans.
 - A. But the Egyptians do tell a tale of the near destruction of humanity, a tale that reveals some of their ideas about how humans were created. This obliqueness and indirection in Egyptian culture has been noted by many scholars. *Myth*, in the sense of explanatory foundation narratives, is a hidden dimension in Egypt.
 - B. We can infer what the myths were from references in prayers, charms, and magical texts. An illustration of this can be seen in the Isis and Osiris myth. We have a full, though very late, account of this myth from the Roman writer Plutarch, but the myth itself does not appear in full form in any ancient Egyptian text found thus far.
- II. *The Deliverance of Mankind from Destruction*, a New Kingdom tale from the longer text *The Book of the Cow of Heaven*, relates that in its first state, humanity lived in harmony with the gods. Both were ruled by Ra, who was "self-created" and was manifest in the sun's journey across the sky.
 - A. Some humans rebel against Ra—we aren't told what the nature of their rebellion was. Ra convenes the pantheon of the gods and threatens to destroy the world because of humankind, "which came into being from my eye." Humans, say the great god, "have plotted against me."
 - B. Ra is dissuaded from destroying the world and retreating into the nothingness from which he emerged. Instead, he sends his daughter, the goddess Hathor, goddess of women and ecstasy, to destroy the rebellious part of humankind.
 - C. Taking the form of the lioness, Hathor slays many people, and once she has begun, she won't stop. Fearful that she will destroy all humans, Ra consults with the gods.
 1. Their plan is to brew 7,000 jugs of beer and mix it with red dust so that it resembles blood. They pour out this mix on the fields, and Hathor thinks that it is human blood, with which she is now intoxicated. She drinks it all and falls asleep, and her intended victims escape.
 2. But those humans who survived her onslaught then fight among themselves. This causes Ra to withdraw from contact with humans.
- III. The presence of this text in tomb inscriptions implies a relationship to concepts of death and resurrection.
 - A. Humanity is separated from the gods by its rebelliousness, but after death—in the realm of Osiris—humanity and the gods will live in harmony.
 - B. Also implied is a connection between the death of an individual (the person buried in the tomb) and the death (threatened and partially realized) of all humanity.
- IV. In Mesopotamian mythology, the flood destroys humanity. In our lectures on *Gilgamesh* (Lectures Twelve and Thirteen), we examined the story of Utnapishtim, the "Babylonian Noah."
 - A. In the context of *Gilgamesh*, the significance of the episode is that Utnapishtim gains immortality after the flood. Gilgamesh wants his "secret" and, in the end, discovers that there really is none to find.

- B. In this lecture, we will look more closely at the epic's narration of the flood episode. This will reveal some similarities with the Egyptian *Deliverance of Mankind* text.
- C. The flood story is in the 11th tablet of the *Epic*. The morning after Utnapishtim and his family are safe on the ship, we read:

With the first glow of dawn, a black cloud rose up from the horizon. All that had been light turned to darkness. The land was shattered like a clay pot. The storm blew; gathering speed, it overtook people like a battle. No one could see another; even the gods couldn't see people. The gods were frightened by the flood; shrinking back they ascended to the heaven, the gods cowered like dogs crouched against the outer wall.

- V. Unlike the Egyptian story, in which mankind is rebellious and incurs the wrath of Ra, no reason for the flood is given in the text. It is an event that happens but is not willed. Even the gods, who told Utnapishtim to build a boat, fear it.
 - A. Ishtar (Inanna), goddess of love and war, played a part in causing the flood, but she soon repents it: "How could I speak evil in the assembly of the gods, ordering the destruction of my people, when I myself gave birth to my people?"
 - B. The flood rages for six days, then subsides. The image of war, evoked in the description of the storm, is now extended: "When the seventh day arrived the flood subsided; it had fought like an army." Utnapishtim looks out: "The sea grew quiet, the tempest was still, the flood ceased. Stillness had set in and all of mankind had returned to clay."
- VI. In contrast to the Egyptian tale, only one family survives. In the standard *Gilgamesh* epic, the survivor of the flood (the Babylonian Noah) is known as Utnapishtim; in related flood myths, he is known as Atrahasis. His being granted immortality is not explained; nor, of course, was the flood from which he was saved.
 - A. This tale can be viewed as representative of a tragic worldview, one that emphasizes the capriciousness of the gods. There are destructive forces in the universe, and we can't always account for them.
 - B. But destruction can have within it the seeds of regeneration. Almost everyone dies, but the Babylonian Noah survives to repopulate the earth.
 - C. Throughout the Mesopotamian literatures, the flood story, and the very word *flood*, is a metaphor for inescapable destruction.

Essential Reading:

James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. I, pp. 3–5.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 215–221.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do other religious traditions convey the idea that "life after death" brings harmony between the human and the divine?
2. In these Mesopotamian myths, the acts of the gods seem arbitrary. What is the cultural meaning of this?

Lecture Fifteen

Myths of Death and Destruction, Part Two

Scope: The terrors of war were personified in Canaanite myth as acts of the goddess of war, Anat. When she enters the fields of battle, “she mows down the cities/she shatters the inhabitants of the coasts/she annihilates the men of the sunrise.” The first part of this lecture retells the exploits of Anat. War was one feared form of annihilation; another was the destructive force of the cycles of nature. The Hittite myth of Telepinu explained drought and crop failure as the result of the disappearance of the god associated with fertility. As the result of his disappearance, “the whole earth became arid/rivers dried up/fruit, vegetables and grain were no more/trees and grass withered away/men died of hunger/cattle no longer bred.” To return the earth to fertility, the gods devised a plan, commemorated and reenacted in Hittite ritual, that returns the god to his place in the natural order so that “life can come again to earth.” Stories of the dying and reborn god were a common feature of ancient Near Eastern myth. In the case of this Hittite myth, the relationship between myth and ritual is made quite explicit.

Outline

- I. In the myths of Ugarit, the city-state on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean of the late second millennium B.C., the figures of the god Baal and his consort and sister Anat dominate the mythic landscape. Ugarit was on the northern borders of Canaan (in modern-day Syria), and much of its mythology has literary echoes in the Hebrew Bible.
 - A. Though Anat is not mentioned directly in the Bible, her name is preserved in the Bible in the names of heroes, such as the judge Shamgar, the son of Anat, and in place names, such as Anathot, Jeremiah’s birthplace, near Jerusalem.
 - B. Anat personifies the horrors of war. In the tales of the Baal cycle (c. 1200 B.C.), Anat comes to the aid of Baal and smites his enemies.
 - C. We saw in the *Gilgamesh* epic that Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, personified the natural human reaction to disaster: the fear that it may occur again. Similarly, Anat, in the Baal cycle of the *Epic of the Gods*, personifies the fear of war and the fear that the next war may be worse than the last.
 - D. After one encounter, Anat “bathes her knees in the blood of soldiers, her rings in the blood of shield-bearers.” Afterwards, she returns to the palace of Baal. But her work is not finished—as she understands it, she is still at war:

She has not become sated by the battle in the plain
By mowing down the inhabitants of cities.
She lays many low and looks upon the scene.
She mows them down and enjoys herself.
She swells in jubilation, her heart is filled with joy.
She rejoices when she bathes her knees in the blood of soldiers
Her rings in the blood of shield bearers.
- II. The human endeavor of warfare was feared and mythologized. Its causes were attributed to the gods.
 - A. Natural disasters, great and small, were treated in a similar fashion. We have studied flood narratives; these represent a response to an unusual and unpredictable disaster.
 - B. A more common threat was the failure of crops. This threatened the individual farmer and the fabric of society.
 - 1. City-states were organized on the basis of surplus food that was supplied by farmers on the periphery. With the failure of crops came the failure of cities.
 - 2. The institutions of kingship and priesthood were also threatened.

- III. The Hittite myth of Telepinu, one of many Near Eastern nature cycle myths, explained drought and other causes of crop failure as the result of the disappearance of a fertility god.
- A. Telepinu, the fertility god of the Hittite pantheon, grew angry at the evil deeds of humanity. He is so angry that he puts a sandal on the wrong foot (an odd expression of anger for a god!) and disappears from the human realm.
 - B. With his disappearance, the earth dries up. Grain, fruit, and grass wither away; humans and animals succumb to starvation and die; those that survive cease to breed.
 - C. The gods, fearful that the world will be destroyed, set out in search of Telepinu. Each god sends a scout to look for him—the sun god sends an eagle—but they all fail.
- IV. In these myths, repeated attempts and failures are, ultimately, followed by success.
- A. The goddess of the sun sends a bee to find Telepinu and gives it very specific instructions: If you find him asleep, sting him and clean him with your wax.
 - 1. The bee searches and finds Telepinu hidden and in a deep sleep. When the bee stings him, the god flies into a rage and wreaks further destruction, this time destroying villages and stopping up rivers and springs.
 - 2. Realizing that Telepinu was in an uncontrolled rage, the goddess sends an eagle to seize him.
 - 3. Brought before the gods, Telepinu is exorcised of his evil spirit and fertility is restored.
 - B. “He came again to his abode and cared again for his land. The altars were set right for the gods. Telepinu let the sheep go to the fold. Let the cattle go to the pen.”
 - 1. At this point in the myth, the relationship among the gods, the king, and temple ritual is emphasized.
 - 2. In commemoration of Telepinu’s restoration to the vegetal world, the fleece of a lamb was hung from a pole in the temple. The readers of the myth are told to reenact this ritual to ensure fertility and general prosperity.
 - 3. This is an example of the intimate link between text and cultic practice.
 - 4. The text of the myth incorporates the words of the ritual to be used to propitiate Telepinu.
 - 5. The line “It signifies the lamb’s favorable message” is a reference to “reading” the entrails of animals for messages from the gods. The Hittites practiced this art, as did the Sumerians and other Mesopotamian cultures. Many cuneiform tablets preserve records of these divinations, with sculpted copies of animal organs, especially livers, that were used to teach the art of reading the messages.
 - 6. In the myth of Telepinu, the animal signs signify that the god of fertility has been propitiated, and fertility and peace will return to the Hittite realms.

Essential Reading:

James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, pp. 87–91.

Supplementary Reading:

Uriel Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, chapter 7.

Questions to Consider:

1. Which of the four approaches to the study of myth seems the most appropriate for analyzing the Anat and Telepinu myths?
2. How did the Hittites explain natural disasters?

Lecture Sixteen

The Individual and Society—Legal Texts

Scope: Ancient Near Eastern societies were highly stratified and hierarchical. In the different cultural areas of the Near East, systems of government and administration evolved along similar lines, albeit with significant structural differences. Mesopotamian societies developed legal codes promulgated by a central administration and implemented at a local level. Egyptian society, though governed by a strong central power, did not develop a parallel system of legal codification and jurisprudence. Rather, it depended on local custom and “case law.” After illustrating this distinction between Mesopotamia and Egypt, the lecture will examine what is perhaps the most famous law code of the ancient Near East, the Code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon. Compiled in the first half of the 18th century B.C., the stated purpose of the code was “to decree equity in the land, to eradicate the wicked and the evil so that the powerful might not oppress the powerless.”

Outline

- I. In this and the subsequent lecture, we will examine the social and legal institutions of Egypt and Mesopotamia. We can reconstruct these, to a limited extent, from both legal texts and literary texts, including myths. Lecture Sixteen will focus on the legal material; Lecture Seventeen, on the mythic and literary.
 - A. Egyptian society was divided into two major classes:
 1. The nobility, which included the military, the priesthood, and the administrators of the *nomes* (“governorships”) and municipalities.
 2. The commoners or “everyone else.”
 - B. The divisions among the commoners were somewhat fluid, including tenant farmers, slaves, and independent agriculturists.
 - C. The elite constituted between three and five percent of the population. Tension between commoners and members of the elite is a theme in Egyptian literature, as we shall see in the “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.”
 - D. Egyptologists have sketched a broad outline of Egyptian society, using archival documents. It begins with the division of elites and commoners, then moves to relationships in the family structure.
 - E. The family unit was central to the social structure, but curiously, marriage was not the binding element of the family.
 1. There was no marriage ceremony or registration.
 2. Nor, in a society suffused with religious myth, was there a sacrament of marriage.
 3. Rather, marriage was a private, secular matter.
 4. Monogamy was the norm, but there were other arrangements. Monogamy was not sanctified.
- II. In Egypt, there was no legal profession, nor did the idea of a unified legal code exist. Thus, in an organized society with complex religious and military institutions, infractions of the law and legal disputes were settled by local government officials. They based their decision on earlier decisions of a similar nature—case law, rather than code law.
 - A. These officials could impose physical punishment, including flogging, and could demand restitution to an aggrieved party. We know of some cases in which the death penalty was meted out—usually for treason or murder and, at times, for tomb robbery, a crime as old as tomb building.
 - B. In contrast to some Mesopotamian codes and to biblical laws, adultery was not an offense dealt with by officials, but a private matter within the family.
 1. Through most of ancient Egyptian history, the status of women, for the time, was relatively high.
 2. They could own property and were not veiled or confined. Marriage was usually arranged by the woman’s father. Again, in contrast to other Near Eastern cultures, a young woman about to be married was not expected to be a virgin.

- III.** In contrast, the Mesopotamian cultures, beginning with the Sumerians, had a series of formal, codified law systems.
- A.** Archaeologists have found vast numbers of documents, including codes, contracts, and correspondence, that give us insight into these legal systems. There were judges, often local military officers, but again, no lawyers. Law cases were often heard and adjudicated in the temples. One would give testimony under oath to the god or gods of the city (the equivalent of the modern-day swearing on the Bible).
 - B.** Law codes were made public. In some periods, they were inscribed on monuments in urban centers. Given that only a small percentage of the population was literate, the purpose of this public display seemed to be the enforcement of the idea of the rule of law.
 - C.** As in Egyptian society, there were classes that included priests, military men, administrators, and commoners. Law codes often specified the status of class members under the law; there were different laws for the elites and for commoners.
 - D.** Within the family unit, patriarchal authority held firm. The father retained this authority until his death.
 - E.** Over the centuries, we can see a development in inheritance law.
 - 1. In Sumer, the eldest son inherited all.
 - 2. In Assyria and Babylon, the eldest son inherited a larger portion of the estate, but not all of it.
 - 3. Generally, daughters could not inherit, but they received ownership of the dowry at marriage. In case of divorce, the woman was entitled to her dowry, though we know that this ideal was not often put into practice.
- IV.** Perhaps the most famous of the Mesopotamian law codes is the Code of Hammurabi.
- A.** Hammurabi ruled Babylon in the early 18th century B.C.
 - 1. He reigned for more than 40 years and consolidated the empire he inherited from the founders of his dynasty.
 - 2. Some scholars read the reference to King Amraphel in Genesis 14 as a reference to Hammurabi.
 - 3. Given that this chapter tells of a battle in Abraham's time and lists the kings engaged in that "battle of the Valley of Sidim," it would tie Abraham's story to a known historical figure. But not all scholars agree with the Amraphel-Hammurabi equation.
 - B.** Hammurabi's Code was inscribed on two 8-foot-high slabs of stone.
 - 1. One of these was taken to Paris at the beginning of the 20th century and can be seen in the Louvre.
 - 2. At the top of the stone is an image of the king receiving the law from the god Shamash.
- V.** There are 282 laws in the code.
- A.** It deals with court procedure; damage to property; family law, including inheritance; and other topics. But in dealing with any one category of law, it is selective rather than comprehensive.
 - B.** It is difficult to say what the concepts behind this code are. In some areas, it seems harsh and, in others, lenient. Throughout, it is pervaded with a sense of justice, though that sense may be harsh for our modern sensibilities. Some examples follow (note that the references to *man* indicate a free man of the elite):
 - 1. No. 6: "If a man steals the property of the temple or the property of the city, he should be put to death; the one who received the stolen goods should also be put to death." This can be contrasted with Egyptian law, which seldom imposed capital punishment.
 - 2. No. 128: "If a man acquired a wife, but did not draw up the contracts for her, that woman is not his wife." Contrast this with the laissez-faire attitude toward marriage in Egypt.
 - 3. No. 153: "If a man's wife has killed her husband because of another man, they shall impale her on the stake."
 - 4. No. 109: "If outlaws have congregated in the establishment of a woman wine seller, and she has not arrested those outlaws and did not take them to the palace, that wine seller shall be put to death."
- VI.** In the code is a set of laws concerning damages. These reflect the social divisions of Babylonian society:
- A.** "If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye."
 - B.** "If he destroys the eye of a commoner, he shall pay one measure of silver."
 - C.** "If he destroys the eye of a slave, or breaks the bone of a slave, he shall pay half the value of the slave."

- D. This serves to remind us that while this code was deemed by Hammurabi to be the code of a just society, it does not reflect our sense of justice. The code, when studied in the context of other documents of the period, tells us a great deal about Babylonian society in the early second millennium B.C.

VII. There are also laws governing medical malpractice, sexual behavior, and false witness.

- A. There are many parallels in the Hammurabi Code's regulations regarding incest, the "forbidden relationships" specified in the biblical books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. For example:
1. No. 154: "If a man has had intercourse with his daughter, they shall make that man leave the city."
 2. No. 157: "If a man has lain in the bosom of his mother after [the death of] his father, they shall burn both of them."
- B. False witness is severely dealt with: "If a man accused a[nother] man and brought a charge of murder against him, but has not proved it, his accuser shall be put to death."
- C. Such accusations were also the subject of laws in the book of Deuteronomy (19: 16–21), where the regulation is put in a more abstract fashion:
- ...if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother, then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother ...so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. And those which remain shall hear and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you. And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Essential Reading:

James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, pp. 138–172.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 156–184.

Questions to Consider:

1. Is a legal code a necessity? Or can a society depend on case law?
2. Is Hammurabi's code harsh or lenient by modern legal standards?

Lecture Seventeen

The Individual and Society—Myth and Legend

Scope: Many laws, including laws governing relationships between parents and children, are reflected in myth and legend. This lecture presents two literary texts, one Sumerian and one Egyptian, that reflect the legal and civil ideas of each society. The Sumerian “Dialogue between Father and Son” was dubbed by its translator “the first case of juvenile delinquency.” The Egyptian “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant” reflects that society’s high opinion of eloquence in and out of a court of law.

Outline

- I. Myths reflected the social norms of society. The laws that govern the society are often referred to in tales.
 - A. But a myth is not a law book. The myth may reinforce social-legal norms or challenge them.
 - B. This lecture presents two tales, from two Near Eastern cultures, that reflect concern with regulating social behavior. The Sumerian “Dialogue between Father and Son” is followed by the Egyptian “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.”
- II. The “Dialogue between Father and Son” of the second millennium B.C. has a timeless quality. It could be a modern document.
 - A. The text was pieced together from 17 clay tablets and is dated to approximately 1800 B.C.
 - B. The author/speaker was a scribe, which will become clear as we study the text.
 - C. In Sumer, as in Egypt in the same period, the profession of scribe was one of high prestige, but it was not one that brought its practitioner riches. As our text reveals, this genteel poverty concerned ancient scribes and remains the concern of their modern counterparts.
 - D. But there are other compensations for the life of the mind. Scribes, this unnamed ancient author reminds us, “look to their humanity.”
- III. A dialogue between father (a scribe) and son opens the account:

“Where did you go?”
“I did not go anywhere.”
“If you did not go anywhere, why do you idle about?”

 - A. The father tells his son that instead of “idling about,” he should go to school, recite his assignments, and practice writing on his tablet.
 - B. To see if he was paying attention, the son is asked to repeat his father’s instructions. Thus we, the readers, get to hear it again. This repetition is a hallmark of Near Eastern style.
- IV. The dialogue is followed by the father’s monologue, in which the son’s failings are catalogued and criticized.
 - A. He is told not to wander about in the public square and warned that if he does go out into the street, he should not be “looking around.” Unlike other children, whose parents send their sons to do physical labor, this child has the opportunity to study, but he neglects it.
 - B. He is told to “seek out the first generations” and follow their wisdom: “Emulate your older brother” and become a scribe. The gods decree that sons should follow their father’s profession, and “no profession is as difficult and elevated as that of the scribe.”
 - C. It seems that the son has been financially successful, but this does not satisfy his father: “Night and day I am tortured because of you. Night and day you waste in pleasures. You have accumulated much wealth...have become fat, big, broad, powerful, and puffed ...but you looked not to your humanity.”
 - D. The son is chastised, but not rejected, because “who is the man,” writes the author, “who can really be furious with his son?” His father holds out hope for him, despite the sons “perverseness.”
 - E. The text closes with an invocation of the gods: “May you find favor before your god...may you be the head of your city’s sages.”

- V. Another tale with a contemporary ring is the Egyptian “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.” The story is set in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, c. 2000 B.C. It speaks to a rarely expressed concern for social justice, and it does so in an eloquent manner. The story of the “Eloquent Peasant” is itself told eloquently.
- A. A peasant named Khun-anup, who lives on the desert border of the country, makes his meager living by trading in salt. Leaving his wife and children, he makes his way to the center of the country. With him is his donkey, loaded with salt. Entering the irrigated agricultural areas, he passes through the estates of a nobleman. The overseer, contemptuous of itinerant traders, attempts to extort money from Khun-anup.
 - B. The ruse is to make Khun-anup take his donkey across the barley field. When the donkey eats, the overseer confiscates the animal and the salt.
 - C. When the peasant complains, the overseer says, “No one will listen to a peasant’s complaint.” But the peasant, through the power of eloquent speech, proves him wrong.
 - D. Appealing directly to the noble, Khun-anup presents his case and appeals to the fairness of the noble’s policies.
 - 1. The flowery speech and cogent arguments win the noble over, but he does not give the peasant back his goods.
 - 2. Rather, the noble tells the king of the peasant’s abilities as a storyteller and litigant, and the king asks the noble to continue the process and see to what heights of eloquence the peasant rises. Secretly, the peasant’s speeches are written down.
 - 3. After nine appearances in the noble’s court, each appearance followed by an even more eloquent speech, the peasant is not only pardoned, but he is elevated to the post of overseer. The overseer who tried to cheat him is sacked.
 - E. The lesson here is that justice can be achieved through cogent argument and correct speech.
 - 1. A set of Egyptian sayings contemporaneous with this tale, the sayings of Ptah-Hotep, warns the nobility that the poor deserve the same justice as the rich.
 - 2. In Mesopotamia and Canaan, we find similar ideas about social justice and the power of argument to achieve, or at least to further, that cause.

Essential Reading:

Samuel N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, pp. 13–16.

Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1: pp. 169–184.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *the Ancient Orient*, pp. 131–141.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. How might a modern parent rewrite the “Dialogue between Father and Son”?
- 2. The “Eloquent Peasant” promotes the idea of social justice. Do you think that such justice was achieved in ancient Egypt?

Lecture Eighteen

Love, Lust, and Poetry

Scope: The joy and pain of love is a dominant theme in Near Eastern literatures. Poetry and myth were the forms in which this theme was expressed. This lecture opens with a presentation of Egyptian love poems from the 14th century B.C. These timeless poems, originally set to musical accompaniment, still speak to readers today. Often sexually explicit, they describe emotion and fantasy in a compressed, direct style. While Egyptian poems spoke directly of human love, Mesopotamian poems often focused on the amatory adventures and misadventures of the gods. These tales of the gods were often used as charms by lovers seeking good fortune in matters of the heart. We will look at some examples of this “love charm” genre.

Outline

- I. Each ancient Near Eastern culture had a distinct vocabulary and set of ideas about love.
 - A. Myth, often in poetic form, was one way these ideas were expressed.
 - B. Another was in love poetry. In ancient Egypt, love, or *mry*, referred to both the emotional and sexual aspects of love. The subject of Egyptian love poetry is unmarried, unencumbered love. Always remembering that we can speak only of what archaeologists have found and deciphered, we can speak of love poetry as having flourished most in the New Kingdom.
 - C. The papyri on which these poems were preserved are from 1300–1100 B.C., and scholars think that these poems were originally set to musical accompaniment. Their literary style is direct and concise; the translations have endeavored to convey these aspects of the original.
 - D. In the poems, the young men and the young women address each other as “brother” and “sister.” This is not a reference to incest among the nobility, but is a literary convention, one with parallels in the Hebrew Bible in the Song of Songs.
- II. A cycle of seven poems, preserved in the Chester Beatty papyrus, is narrated alternately by a man and a woman.
 - A. It opens with this stanza:

The One, the sister without peer
The handsomest of all!
She looks like the rising morning star
At the start of a happy year...
 - B. The female voice responds:

My brother torments my heart with his voice
He makes sickness take hold of me
He is neighbor to my mother’s house
And I cannot go to him...
 - C. The couple overcomes the obstacles set before them, meet, and are separated yet again. The young man falls ill with longing:

Seven days since I saw my sister,
And sickness invaded me
I am heavy in all my limbs
My body has forsaken me.
 - D. This alternation between male and female voices is rare. In most of the love poetry that we have, the man addresses the woman. This is in keeping with Near Eastern ideas of gender and of the Egyptian idea that *mry* flows from the stronger to the weaker.
 - E. A collection of poems preserved in the Harris papyrus has the wonderful title: “Beginning of the Delightful, Beautiful Songs of Your Beloved Sister as She Comes From the Fields.” These poems are

replete with nature imagery and make specific reference to hunting and fishing along the Nile, an activity favored by both the nobility and commoners.

The voice of the wild goose shrills,
It is caught by its bait
My love of you pervades me
I cannot loosen it.
I shall retrieve my nets
But what do I tell my mother
To whom I go daily
Laden with bird catch?
I have spread no snares today
I am caught in my love of you.

- F.** In the above poem, the natural world serves as a symbol of attraction. In other poems of the period, it symbolizes the difficulty of attaining the object of desire. This poem was reconstructed from the fragments of a vase on which it was inscribed. Thirty-one fragments of the vase were recovered in the excavations at Deir el-Medina. This is one of the stanzas:

My sister on the other side
The river is between our bodies
The waters are mighty at flood time
A crocodile waits in the shallows.
I enter the water and brave the waves
My heart is strong in the deep
The crocodile seems like a mouse to me
The flood as land to my feet
It is her love that gives me strength
It makes a water-spell for me
I gaze at my heart's desire
As she stands facing me.

III. The context and imagery of Mesopotamian love poetry differs from the Egyptian.

- A.** Love poetry is most often set in mythic tales that tell of the amatory adventures of royalty and of the gods.
1. Instead of “brother” and “sister” imagery, we have the imagery of king and queen or god and goddess.
 2. Rituals in which the blessings of the gods were invoked frequently referred to the love interests of the gods.
 3. Ishtar, the goddess of love, is often the focus of this interest.
- B.** Like the Egyptians, the Sumerians and Babylonians employed nature imagery in their love poems. In this Sumerian lyric, the garden is the symbol of a woman's love:

My blossom bearer in the apple garden
Your appeal is sweet
My budding garden of the apple tree
Sweet are your charms.

- C.** This 16th century–B.C. hymn to the goddess Ishtar reminds the worshipper/listener that:

She is clothed with pleasure and love
She is laden with vitality, charm, and voluptuousness
In her lips she is sweet, life is in her mouth.
In her appearance rejoicing becomes full

IV. The biblical Song of Songs, attributed to Solomon, king of Israel, makes use of technique and imagery familiar to us from the love poetry of the Egyptians and the cultures of Mesopotamia:

I am the rose of Sharon, the lily at the valleys

As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

- A. The Song of Songs employs the brother/sister image in many verses:

I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.

- B. Throughout this course, we have examined parallels between ancient Near Eastern texts and the Bible. Perhaps the most famous are the parallels between the flood story in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the story of Noah and the ark.
- C. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, these parallels were found to be disturbing and disruptive. Today, scholars in both biblical and Near Eastern studies see great benefits in the examination of literary parallels.

Essential Reading:

Jack Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. IV, pp. 2471–2483.

James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, pp. 257–258.

Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 2: pp. 182–193.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 185–198.

Questions to Consider:

1. Would the brother/sister imagery of the Egyptian poems speak to readers of modern poetry?
2. How would you explain the preference for divine imagery in the Mesopotamian love poems?

Lecture Nineteen

Marriage, Divorce, and Other Arrangements

Scope: Advice on matters of the heart was offered in both *wisdom literature*, written in the form of proverbs or maxims, and in stories that illustrated common or uncommon human dilemmas. This lecture opens with readings from the Egyptian wisdom text the “Instructions of Ankhsheshonq,” which consists of a father’s advice to his son. Among its maxims: “Do not dwell in a house with your in-laws” and “If you find your wife with her lover get yourself a bride to suit you.” Issues of family discord and disaster are treated differently and in a novelistic manner in the “Tale of the Two Brothers,” an Egyptian story of jealousy, rivalry, murder, and revenge. We will examine the 13th century–B.C. text of that story and conclude the lecture with observations on parallels between its plot and the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife.

Outline

- I. Egyptian *instruction texts* taught moral lessons by drawing illustrations from real-life situations. One aspect of real life about which advice was readily offered was the realm of love and marriage. This guidance was often mixed in with advice about business and civic affairs.
 - A. In the “Instructions of Ankhsheshonq,” a text from the late Egyptian period, the advice is delivered in the form of short maxims. Like many other instruction texts, this one is preceded by a narrative that provides the circumstances for the composition of the maxims.
 1. Ankhsheshonq was a priest of the sun cult. On a visit to friends, he overhears conspirators plotting to overthrow the pharaoh. The plotters are caught, and Ankhsheshonq is arrested as an accessory.
 2. In prison, he composes this set of instructions for his son. Because the prison officials won’t give him proper writing materials, he must write on sherds of pottery from the wine jars brought to him. (So he had some prison perks!)
 - B. Many aspects of life are covered in this collection. Let us look at four sayings related to love and marriage:
 1. “Take a wife when you are twenty years old, so that you may have a wife when you are young.”
 2. “Do not dwell in a house with your in-laws.”
 3. “Do not let your son marry a woman from another town lest he be taken from you.”
 4. “If you find your wife with her lover get yourself a bride to suit you.”
- II. These maxims speak to a pragmatism and tendency toward conservatism and stability in Egyptian life. They refer to the practical and pragmatic nature of marriage in ancient Egypt. There, marriage was neither a sacrament nor a contract, but a social arrangement of convenience.
 - A. Moral instruction and entertainment are offered in an Egyptian tale from an earlier period, the “Tale of the Two Brothers.”
 1. Dated to the 13th century B.C., this story was first published by the French scholar de Rougé in 1852.
 2. As with the reaction to the 1847 publication of the Flood Tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, much of the ensuing public conversation centered on questions of biblical precedence and authority. Just as *Gilgamesh* paralleled the story of Noah, the “Tale of the Two Brothers” paralleled the story of Joseph in Genesis.
 - B. Anubis and Bata were two brothers who lived on an estate. Anubis, the elder, was married and owned a house. Bata, the younger, worked on the farm and lived with his brother and sister-in-law.
 - C. This tale has mythic elements and references. The names Anubis and Bata are the names of gods. And, as the story unfolds, the supernatural is invoked.
 - D. Working in the fields one day, the brothers are in need of seed-grain. Bata returns to the house, and his sister-in-law attempts to seduce him. He turns her away and says to her: “But you are like a mother to me, and my brother is like a father.” When her husband returns, she claims that Bata had attacked her: “He said to me ‘come, we will take our pleasure and sleep together.’ But I refused him.”
 - E. At this point, supernatural elements enter the plot.

1. While Anubis is preparing to kill Bata, Bata is warned by the cows that Anubis is waiting behind the stable door. Bata invokes the help of the god Ra, who causes a river full of crocodiles to appear between them.
2. Separated and temporarily safe, Bata appeals to Anubis. He tells him what really happened. To prove his point, Bata castrates himself and throws his phallus into the river. Anubis weeps but is helpless as the river separates them.
3. The tale concludes: "So Bata went to the celestial Valley of the Cedars, and Anubis to his own house. As soon as he arrived he slew his wife and cast her to the dogs and sat mourning for his younger brother."

III. Nineteenth-century readers immediately saw parallels to the Joseph story in Genesis.

- A. Joseph, like Bata, is living in his master's house and working for that master.
- B. The woman of the house (in Genesis, Potiphar's wife) tries to seduce him.
- C. He rebuffs her and is then accused of rape.
- D. Joseph is wrongfully punished.
- E. He is thrown into prison.

IV. But early readers also saw differences, particularly in that the stories diverge. Bata inflicts punishment on himself and is removed to the realm of the gods. Joseph, thrown into prison, emerges as the administrator of all Egypt.

V. These parallels with, and differences from, the biblical narrative both intrigued and disturbed Western readers. The Babel and Bible question—now extended to Egyptian material—continued to grip the public imagination and, to some extent, it still does so today.

Essential Reading:

Shalom Goldman, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Islamic Folklore*, pp. 31–54.

Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 3: pp. 159–184.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 221–225.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why are the "Instructions of Ankhsheshonq" set in a story of political intrigue?
2. How do you understand the function of the supernatural elements in the plot of the "Tale of the Two Brothers"?

Lecture Twenty

Kingship and the Gods

Scope: Near Eastern concepts of kingship, state power, and international relations were expressed through myth and legend. This lecture examines three texts that shed light on the politics and statecraft of the second and third millennia B.C. The ideology behind Near Eastern kingship was expressed forcefully and directly in the *Enuma Elish*, a ritual text that tells how monarchy evolved under the supervision of the gods. The Sumerian myth “Enki and the World Order” tells of that god’s successful efforts to organize Mesopotamia’s natural and human resources. An organized state, presided over by gods and their appointed human officials, could be maintained only by a system of justice. Peaceful relations between states are described in another Sumerian story, “Enmerkar and the Lord of Arrata.” From that tale, we learn of a rich ancient Near Eastern international trade in goods and services, a trade also attested by the archaeological record.

Outline

- I. “Enki and the World Order,” a Sumerian text, is a narrative of the triumph of order over chaos. It serves both as a creation narrative and as an explanation for the initial organization of natural and human resources. The great Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer titled his translation of this text: *The Organization of the Earth and Its Cultural Processes*.
 - A. Enki was the god of the abyss out of which all was created and, as such, was the god of human wisdom.
 - B. Enki is subservient to the great god of the Sumerian pantheon, Enlil.
 - C. Enlil, the father of the gods, brings many parts of the created world into being, but Enki, the “craftsman god,” organizes the world and its inhabitants. He’s the administrator god.
- II. The primary focus of Enki’s efforts is the land of Sumer:

Sumer, great land of all lands, you are filled with light, dispensing divine laws to the people.
Your divine laws are exalted; your heart is profound.

 - A. The “divine laws” are promulgated by the king, who is understood to be the earthy manifestation of the heavenly king.
 - B. The poem moves from the general to the specific, from parallels between the heavenly and earthy realms to the specifics of Mesopotamian geography.
 - 1. Enki travels through Iraq and its neighbors, making a circuit of sacred places. In each place, he designates the natural features of the landscape and invokes the blessings of the gods.
 - 2. He goes first to Ur and says: “Well-supplied, washed by much water, may your divine laws be well-directed. City whose fates have been decreed by Enki, Ur, may you rise to heaven’s heights.”
 - 3. Ur was one of a number of city-states in Sumer. It was not always the most powerful, but it had an importance that was spiritual and mythic.
 - 4. In this text, Ur is the place where the organization of the world begins, and it is the first in importance of sacred places.
 - 5. For modern Western readers of this and other texts that focus on Ur, that city has a biblical resonance. It is associated with Abraham (see Genesis 11:31).
 - 6. Scholars of the ancient Near East and its relationship to the biblical narrative have long debated whether the Ur mentioned in Genesis is the “original” Ur of the Sumerians.
 - C. Returning to the text: The god Enki then visits the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Filling them with water, he blesses them and assigns their organization to a set of lesser gods. Before moving on, Enki fills the rivers with fish, instructing them to multiply. Similarly, Enki visits Sumer’s sea, the Persian or Arabian Gulf, and assigns a god to oversee it.

- III. With the natural features and resources of the country taken care of, the “god of world order” moves to organize and bless human endeavor.
 - A. Agriculture is praised: “Enki made it bring forth abundantly its grains and beans.” He appointed gods to oversee irrigation. “Grains he heaped up for the granary, then Enki added granary to granary.”
 - B. Finally, Enki turns his attention to the construction of buildings and cities, an endeavor made possible by the success of agricultural endeavors. Divinely appointed rulers, humans, and animals benefit from the works of the god of order.
- IV. Human endeavor is further described and delineated in the Sumerian text “Enmerkar and the Land of Arrata.”
 - A. This text has mythological elements combined with a description of realpolitik. Here, a human king, locked in a conflict with another monarch, consults with the gods.
 1. Enmerkar, like Gilgamesh, is the child of a human-divine union.
 2. Enmerkar rules Uruk, a city we know from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is the chief city of the realm, but it lacks mineral resources and craftsmen who can fashion implements and ornaments out of those minerals.
 3. Arrata, beyond the mountains, has both minerals and craftsmen.
 - B. This is a tale of looming conflict, a conflict that is sparked by competition for resources and is exacerbated by diplomatic maneuvers and misunderstandings.
 1. At the story’s end, the conflict is resolved. Enmerkar covets the resources of the distant city. (Scholars think that it was in Iran.)
 2. He sends messengers to its king, initiating a series of diplomatic exchanges by messenger, but the messengers have a long road to travel and the messages get garbled.
 3. Each king invokes the protection of the goddess Innana. Magic and ritual acts are used by each side.
 - C. We don’t learn of the final outcome of these diplomatic maneuvers; the text was not fully recovered. But the story includes a remarkable detail that illuminates Sumerian notions of the origins of culture.
- V. The exchange of diplomatic messages by messenger enables Enmerkar and the king of Arrata to make their claims and negotiate.
 - A. But at one point, when the messages become quite complicated, Enmerkar makes a startling move: “The speech was too difficult, its contents were too long, the messenger’s mouth was slow, he could not repeat it. Enmerkar patted some clay and set down the words on a tablet. Before that day, there was no putting of words on clay.”
 - B. Thus, the Sumerians explained the origins of writing, the invention that made their civilization possible. With the invention of writing, trade between the two contesting cities is facilitated and relations are peaceful, though Uruk remains the dominant city.
 - C. Peace between two distant cities was achieved through the arts of the scribe, a reminder of the prestige of the scholar-scribe in the cultures of the ancient Near East.

Essential Reading:

Jack Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. 1, pp. 409–483.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 232–250.

Questions to Consider:

1. Order and chaos are two contending forces in many of the myths we have studied. Does “Enki and the World Order” offer new insights into the ancient understanding of these two forces?
2. Which of the four approaches to the study of myth seems most appropriate in the analysis of these two myths?

Lecture Twenty-One

Royal Historians, Poets, and Artists—Mesopotamia

Scope: This lecture focuses on texts attributed to rulers of the Mesopotamian kingdoms. Using narratives, poetry, and the visual arts, monarchs took the opportunity to present themselves to their subjects and to the rulers of other kingdoms. Sargon of Akkad, who unified Sumer and Akkad in 2350 B.C., bequeathed to history accounts of his achievements. He dubbed himself “the ruler to whom the god Enlil has given no rival” and helped shape the model of empire in the Near East. This model and Sargon’s name were still being invoked 1,500 years after his death. Sargon appointed his daughter Enheduanna priestess of Sin, the moon goddess. She penned one of the great poems of the ancient Near East, “The Adoration of Inanna of Ur.” Remarkably, the complete text of the poem has survived. A close reading of this text yields insights into the idea of the goddess and the place of women in religious ritual.

Outline

- I. The rulers and priests of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon presented themselves as appointed and blessed by the gods. Political and religious reasons prompted the composition of texts, some in the form of autobiographies, that would proclaim and justify the royal or priestly role. These texts were intended for internal consumption within the city-state or for external consumption, addressed to foreign rulers or priests.
 - A. This lecture presents texts by two figures of the third millennium B.C. They were father and daughter, and their self-presentations provide us with the unusual instance of a royal father appointing his daughter to the head of the priesthood.
 - 1. We will draw on a range of texts to reconstruct these documents of self-presentation and perpetuation.
 - 2. They date from c. 2300 B.C. to 800 B.C. Many of the early texts were copied and recopied. Some were altered to fit the historical circumstances of the day.
 - B. New “Sargon” texts were composed down to the eighth century B.C.
 - 1. We have 1,500 years of evolving accounts of this “ideal” monarch and empire builder. Thus, we might speak of the Sargon of history and the Sargon of legend.
 - 2. Georges Roux wrote: “The reign of Sargon made such an impression that his personality was surrounded with a lasting halo of legend.”
- II. In 2350 B.C., Sargon unified through conquest the city-states of Sumer.
 - A. At this point, there were approximately 30 such city-states, each with its own gods and religious cult. Gilgamesh, another king around whom legends were woven, had been the ruler of one of those city-states, Uruk, three centuries earlier. He established a dynasty that lasted for 200 years.
 - B. The Sargon legend is ascribed to the king himself—he is his own publicist.
 - C. In the Sargon legend, or “Sargon autobiography,” the story of his birth and ascent to power is told in mythic literary fashion:

My mother was a high priestess; my father I do not know. My mother conceived me and bore me in secret. She placed me in a reed basket and caulked it with pitch, then she abandoned me to the river, from which I could not escape. I was carried by the river and found by a water carrier. He raised me to be a gardener. Then I was declared king.
 - D. Here we see many elements of “the birth of the hero” genre.
 - 1. The most obvious of these are the obscure or hidden parents, abandonment, and adoption by a person of low status.
 - 2. In another document, “King of Battle,” Sargon tells of his great military campaigns, attributing his success in them to the gods.
 - 3. A copy of this document from the 14th century B.C. was unearthed at Tell El Amarna in Egypt. As we shall see in the next lecture, this site was the capital of Akhenaten’s kingdom and, as such, it was in close contact with Mesopotamian culture.
 - 4. According to the Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim, the Sargon story was widespread from Egypt to Anatolia.

5. It can be compared with the biblical account of Moses in Exodus.

III. Sargon appoints his daughter Enheduanna to the position of high priestess of Sin, the moon goddess. A text attributed to her, “The Adoration of Inanna of Ur” has been preserved nearly in its entirety. It has 153 lines, of which the following illustrate its major themes.

A. The hymn is composed of two parts: (1) an invocation of the goddess’s powers, which are both beneficent and terrifying, and (2) a pronouncement that the prayers of the high priestess have been accepted:

Queen of all powers, radiant in light
Life-giving woman, beloved of the chief gods,
Lover of the chief heaven-god, bedecked with jewels
You have tied the divine powers to your hands
You have gathered them to your breast.

B. The poem quickly moves from what we might call the “life-affirming” qualities of the goddess to her more terrifying aspects:

You have filled the land with venom, like a dragon
Vegetation ceases when you thunder
You who bring down the flood from the mountain
You who rain flaming fire over the land.

C. Throughout the text, both aspects of the goddess—the life-giving and the life-threatening—are intertwined.

D. Battles are often referred to:

You are known for the destruction of the rebellious lands
You are known for massacring their people
You are known for devouring their dead like a dog
You are known for your fierce countenance.

E. At the hymn’s end, Enheduanna is assured, and assures the goddess’s supplicants, that Inanna accepts her prayer and their prayers:

The heart of Inanna was restored
She was clothed with beauty
Filled with joyous allure
How she carried her beauty like the rising moonlight.

IV. This unusual circumstance—the preservation of both Sargon legends and the full text of Enheduanna’s poem—offers us insight into early hero narratives, the idea of kingship, propitiating the goddess, and the royal princess Enheduanna as both priestess of the cult and the first woman poet.

Essential Reading:

Daniel Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100–332 BCE*, pp. 30–35.

Supplementary Reading:

Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, pp. 47–53.

Questions to Consider:

1. Can you suggest modern parallels to Sargon’s self-presentation?
2. Do you see a distinct “woman’s voice” in Enheduanna’s poem?

Lecture Twenty-Two

A Royal Couple—Myth and Reality

Scope: The social arrangements operating in the Near Eastern cultural spheres were differently applied to commoners and to royalty. This lecture examines the cultural influence and marital arrangements of royalty and looks at how they differed from those of the nobility and the common people. Our concentration will be on a royal couple that has become the focus of myth and legend. Akhenaten and Nefertiti, rulers of Egypt in the late 14th century B.C., have entered history as both religious revolutionaries and advocates of a new aesthetic sensibility. We will examine their lives through a study of texts and artifacts uncovered in the ruins of their city, Akhetaten, the “City of the Horizon of the Aten.”

Outline

- I. Although Egyptian marriage between commoners was neither highly regulated nor highly sacred, the marriage of the king and his consort had great meaning for state and cult.
 - A. In some periods, brother-sister and father-daughter marriages within the royal family were encouraged.
 1. There was a mythic aspect to this practice, that is, keeping the royal-divine line within the family.
 2. In Egyptian society generally, there seems to have been no fear or horror of incest such as we find in other Near Eastern cultures, for example, ancient Israel. But this doesn’t mean that incest was sanctioned. We know of it in the royal family only.
 - B. The royal couple was the human manifestation of the roles of the gods. The king was Horus when alive and, in death, became Osiris. The queen, as his consort, had a biological and mythic role in the conception of the next king. Thus, myth dominated ideas of royalty’s place in the natural order.
- II. Akhenaten, first crowned Amenhotep IV, was the son of Amenhotep III of the 18th dynasty. He was born in approximately 1375 B.C., in Thebes, capital of the Egyptian Empire, which his father had expanded considerably. In Thebes was the temple at Karnak, center of the cult of the god Amun.
 - A. Amun was at this time one of the central Egyptian deities, associated with the god Ra as Amun-Ra.
 1. His iconography had a human aspect—a man wearing two plumes on his head—and an animal aspect—the ram.
 2. Amun was associated with darkness and secrecy.
 - B. The pharaoh then, was the son of the god Amun.
 1. The priests of Amun were quite powerful; they administered the vast estates of the royal house.
 2. The authority of the Amun high priest extended beyond his own cult. He was “overseer of all the priests of all the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt.”
 - C. The military exploits of Amenhotep III, which led to the expansion and strengthening of the empire, were consecrated to Amun. This led to the strengthening of the Amun priesthood.
- III. Akhenaten, as Amenhotep IV, acceded to the throne on his father’s death. Within a few years, he instituted a rebellion against the Amun cult and all that its power implied—the expansion of empire and the centralization of power in the hands of the Amun priests.
 - A. Some scholars see him as undercutting the mythic foundations of the state and its religion. If his father’s reign was Egypt at its most powerful and most “mythic,” Akhenaten’s reign was an exercise in “anti-myth.”
 - B. Akhenaten instituted his own substitute for the Amun cult, the worship of the “Aten,” symbolized by the solar disc. The old gods were neglected and even maligned.
 1. The Aten soon had its own cult, with temples and priests. Especially neglected was the cult of Osiris, god of the dead.
 2. Akhenaten married Nefertiti, whose origins are unknown. Operating outside of the mythic norms of kingship, Akhenaten accorded Nefertiti greater status than any previous queen. She was his partner in the religious revolution that was soon to follow. Excavations at both Karnak and Amarna reveal that Nefertiti instituted and led cultic activities.

3. In the iconography of the Amarna period, as the period of Akhenaten's reign is known, the royal couple is often portrayed together. Together, they had six daughters, who often appear, individually or in a group, in the art of the period.
 - C. In the fifth year of his reign, Akhenaten moved his capital to a newly built city, which he named Akhet-Aten, the "City of the Horizon of the Aten." His own name was now Akhenaten ("worshipper," or "force," of the sun disc).
 - D. The naturalistic and colorful artistic productions of this city, now known as Amarna art, were dedicated to the Aten and to the glories of the natural world. No attention was paid to other gods; often, Amun images were erased. There was less attention paid to the mythic elements of Egyptian culture, though Akhenaten and Nefertiti, as the chief devotees of the Aten, were constructing a myth of their own.
 - E. Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their children were portrayed in direct contact with the Aten, as benefiting from the sun's rays.
- IV. Akhenaten's religious and cultural revolution is associated with the decline of Egyptian military power.
- A. Scholars debate the question of cause and effect here.
 1. Was Akhenaten a monotheist? Was he a pacifist?
 2. For some, Akhenaten's move to his new city, his subversion of the Amun priesthood, and his antipathy to the old capital at Thebes threatened to undermine imperial power and almost brought that collapse about.
 - B. A more considered view was that Akhenaten's reforms coincided with a set of challenges to Egyptian power.
 1. These included the unstable political situation of the vassal kings in Syria-Palestine and the rise of the Hittites as an international power.
 2. Akhenaten, whose energies were focused on religion, art, and the family, harmed the empire through neglect that did not strike his successors as benign.
 3. The great expression of Akhenaten's revolutionary ideas is his "Hymn to the Aten." In our next lecture, we will study this hymn in depth.
 - C. In the last years of Akhenaten's reign, a reaction set in. There is evidence that worship of the old gods resurfaced, if it had ever gone away. The deposed Amun priesthood must have expressed its displeasure.
 - D. Most significant from a political standpoint is the fact that Egyptian influence in the far reaches of the empire was greatly diminished.
 1. We have precise details of this decline from the Amarna letters, the cuneiform documents found in the ruins of Akhetaten.
 2. The letters were found in 1887 by an Egyptian peasant woman who was looking for potsherds and other clay items to use for fertilizer on the neighboring fields.
 3. The writing on the sherds she found was not recognizable—not hieroglyphs, but cuneiform writing. Unfortunately, she had ground up many sherds before people realized what they were.
 4. In the letters, which number in the hundreds, we can find dramatic references to the anarchic political and military situation in Egypt and Western Asia in the 14th century B.C.
 - E. In Amarna, the reign of Akhenaten and Nefertiti lasted for another 10 years. After Akhenaten's death, the capital was moved back to Thebes.
 1. The Amun cult was reinstituted at Karnak.
 2. The empire was strengthened through military expansion.
 3. There was a return of the mythic interpretation of state and kingship.
 4. A text from Tutankhamen's tomb, describing the rebuilding of the Amun temples after Akhenaten's death, refers to Akhenaten as "the great criminal."
 5. Much of the Amarna period art—sculpture, wall painting, monumental inscription—was deliberately smashed or erased; hence the many fragments of these objects in museum collections throughout the world.
 - F. This dramatic story of religious and cultural revolution, intertwined with the story of the royal family, has caught the imagination of many modern writers, artists, poets. In the following lecture, which will focus on Akhenaten's "Hymn to the Sun," we will look at some of these modern responses to a turbulent and fascinating period in ancient Near Eastern history.

Essential Reading:

Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*, pp. 57–153.

Supplementary Reading:

Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, pp. 82–88.

Questions to Consider:

1. How would you explain the different understandings of royal marriage and marriage among commoners?
2. Was Akhenaten a pacifist? What is the evidence pro and con?

Lecture Twenty-Three

Royal Historians, Poets, and Artists—Egypt

Scope: This lecture examines the literary and artistic legacy of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, rulers of Egypt at the end of the 14th century B.C. The study of their reign reveals that they facilitated close connections between the Mesopotamian and Egyptian spheres of influence. Preserved in the Amarna letters, one of the great archaeological finds of the late 19th century, is the correspondence between Akhenaten's court and the courts of the kings of Western Asia. The international character of the Amarna period—Akhenaten's reign—is also revealed in the graphic and literary arts. The lecture moves to a close reading of Akhenaten's "Hymn to the Sun." That text has been compared to the great nature hymn of the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 104. The lecture concludes with a survey of modern literary and artistic responses to the rich culture of the Amarna period.

Outline

- I. This lecture examines two types of Egyptian royal texts: administrative and literary. The Amarna letters and the "Hymn to the Sun" of Akhenaten yield insights into the religious and cultural interaction between Egypt and its neighbors.
 - A. We can study the cultural, diplomatic, and military relationships among the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite spheres by reference to the Amarna letters of the 14th century B.C. The rulers of the area now called Amarna, and then called Akhetaten, were Akhenaten and Nefertiti.
 - B. The "letters," preserved on clay tablets, were discovered in the 1880s.
 1. Akhenaten's court carried on an extensive correspondence with foreign rulers and with vassal kings under his protection. Among the former were the kings of Babylon, the Hittite lands, and Cyprus. Among the latter were Egyptian-appointed rulers in Canaan.
 2. In the letters are many references to mythic materials. A letter from the Egyptian vassal in Lebanon to Pharaoh Akhenaten opens by extolling the king's divinity:

I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, my sun, my divinity.
The breath of my life, seven and seven times.
 - C. The letter then moves from praising the king to executing his orders. The author, Ammun-ira, quotes the king's earlier letter, which said, "Be prepared for the troops of the king":

I have heard very well, and now I am prepared with my horses and my chariots.
May the troops of the king, my lord, my sun, my divinity,
Smash the head of his enemies.
- II. This correspondence was recorded in Akkadian cuneiform, which was the diplomatic and trading language of the ancient Near East. During this period, the Egyptian scribes at Akhenaten's court were trained in both Egyptian hieroglyphic script and in the cuneiform script. This indicates the international, cosmopolitan outlook of Akhenaten and Nefertiti's court.
 - A. We have preserved 380 of these Amarna letters.
 - B. They indicate that the Egyptian empire, with its vast holdings in Western Asia, was weakening because Akhenaten neglected to supply and support his vassals. Was Akhenaten a pacifist? No; rather, the empire weakened for external reasons.
- III. The distinctive art of this court—both in portraiture and representations of vegetal and animal forms—is known as Amarna art.
 - A. Its most famous exemplars are the bust of Nefertiti and portraits of Akhenaten.
 - B. Like the Amarna letters, the Amarna style in art reveals an international influence.
 - C. Unlike most Egyptian portraiture, the portraits of the Amarna royal family are highly distinctive; these cannot be mistaken for the art of any other historical period.

- IV. The religious ideas promoted by Akhenaten and Nefertiti were as distinctive and forward-looking as their art and diplomacy. Many scholars would make the case that these aspects of culture—religious, artistic, political/diplomatic—were of a piece, that is, displayed a thematic unity.
- A. This modern perception has drawn many artists and writers to the depiction of the period and its royal protagonists. Akhenaten’s “Hymn to the Sun” has fired the imagination of scholars of religion, poets, novelists, and visual artists.
 - B. Scholars of the ancient Near East are deeply divided on the question of how the “Hymn” is to be understood.
 - 1. First published in the first years of the 20th century, the “Hymn” was hailed by some Egyptologists as the first declaration of monotheistic faith.
 - 2. James Henry Breasted of the University of Chicago saw it as a universalist/ecumenical hymn, and he dubbed its author, Akhenaten, “the first individual in human history.”
 - 3. Egyptologist Miriam Lichtheim, writing in the 1970s, said, “The Hymn expresses the cosmopolitan and humanist outlook of the New Kingdom at its purest and most sympathetic. All peoples are seen as the creatures of the sun-god, who has made them diverse in skin color, speech, and character.”
 - C. The opening:

You shine out in beauty on the horizon of Heaven, oh living Aten, the beginning of life. When you have appeared on the eastern horizon, you have filled every land with your perfection.
 - D. The Aten was an Egyptian sun god, known from c. 2000 B.C. texts. In this poem, c. 1350 B.C., Akhenaten presents the Aten as the sole god (“there is no other of your kind”). Throughout this long hymn, there are none of the traditional references to the many gods of the Egyptian pantheon.
 - E. The second stanza of the hymn invites comparison to the great nature poem of the Psalms, Psalm 104:

From Akhenaten:

When you set in the western light land
Earth is in darkness as if in death sleepers lie in their bed chambers, heads covered,
One eye cannot see another
...Every lion comes from its den
All the serpents hover.

And from Psalm 104:

You bring on darkness and it is night
When all the beasts of the forests stir.
The lions roar for prey
Seeking their food from God
When the sun rises, they come back
And crouch in their dens.

- V. For some scholars, these similarities and correspondences indicated that the Egyptian and Hebrew texts influenced each other. These scholars believed that biblical figures—interlocutors among the Hebrews in Egypt—were the link. For others—and this is the dominant view today—the similarities indicate common international usages of literary images.
- A. Among the notable scholarly and artistic responses to the publication and discussion of the “Hymn to the Aten” are Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1938) and Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers* (1945). Both works posited direct contact between Egyptian and Hebraic ideas and texts.
 - 1. Freud imagined Moses as the figure who transmitted Akhenaten’s monotheistic legacy to the Hebrews.
 - 2. Mann’s novel chose the earlier figure of Joseph. In Genesis 39, we read of Joseph’s encounter with Potiphar’s wife, which leads to his imprisonment. From that imprisonment, he rose to greatness.
 - 3. Mann went to Egypt and Palestine in 1930 and absorbed a great deal of the “atmosphere” of the Near East. He read widely in history and religion.
 - 4. In his novel, Mann has Joseph meet Akhenaten.

B. Artistic responses include Philip Glass's 1984 opera *Akhnaten*.

Essential Reading:

Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*, pp. 157–181.

Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 2: pp. 89–100.

Supplementary Reading:

Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, pp. 315–326.

Questions to Consider:

1. Does the “Hymn to the Sun” express a monotheistic idea?
2. What were the cultural products of the Amarna age?

Lecture Twenty-Four

Wisdom Literature; Conclusions

Scope: This lecture surveys a body of writing that modern scholars describe as *wisdom literature*. The Hebrew Bible provides some examples, including the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. These texts, and parallel texts from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Hittite kingdoms, grapple with humanity's oldest and deepest questions. Throughout this course, we have encountered these questions, which are often addressed in narrative form. Although the narratives embedded in myth address many of the same questions about the conduct and meaning of life, they do not do so directly. Their power, rather, is in their subtlety and indirection. Wisdom literature attempts to provide answers for ultimate questions in a more direct fashion. We will study two short collections of "instruction" or advice, one from Egypt and one from Mesopotamia. We then move to the question of suffering, particularly to the issue of why the good suffer and what our response to suffering should be. The "Babylonian Theodicy," a text from the second millennium B.C., addresses these issues in a moving and direct manner. In our survey of wisdom literature, we will return to many of the themes addressed throughout this course.

Outline

- I. We can distinguish between two forms of wisdom literature: (a) wisdom conveyed through sayings or proverbs and (b) wisdom conveyed through philosophical dialogue.
 - A. Throughout the Near East, we find both forms. In Egypt, *instructions*, that is, collections of sayings, often presented as a father's instruction to his son, were common.
 - B. In Lecture Nineteen on marriage and divorce, we examined some of the wise sayings of Ankhsheshonq.
 - C. We can find many parallels between these wisdom sayings and those of the Hebrew Bible, for example, in the Book of Proverbs.
- II. An earlier Egyptian wisdom collection, *The Instructions of the Vizier Ptah-hotep*, is written in the form of advice to his son, who is slated to inherit the position of vizier, or minister, to the pharaoh. The text is from c. 2400 B.C.
 - A. These instructions open with a call for humility: "Let not your heart be puffed up because of your knowledge. Take counsel from the ignorant as well as the wise... Good speech is more hidden than the emerald; it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones."
 - B. In this same spirit, Maimonides (of Egypt) in the late 12th century says: "Teach yourself to say 'I do not know' and you will gain in wisdom." Here, we see the spirit of biblical wisdom articulated anew in the medieval period.
 - C. Ptah-hotep's instructions to a future minister are psychologically astute: "Be calm when you listen to a petitioner's speech. Don't rebuff him before he has said what he has come to say. A petitioner likes attention to his words better than the fulfillment of his request." Another observation has a contemporary ring: "The wise man rises early in the morning to establish himself; the fool rises early in the morning only to agitate himself."
- III. Fifteen hundred years later, Egyptian instructions remained a popular genre.
 - A. The 800 B.C. *Instruction of Amen-em-opet* makes the case for social justice:

Guard yourself against robbing the oppressed;
Don't be overbearing when encountering the disabled
He who does evil, the very riverbank abandons him
And the flood waters carry him off.
 - B. But this text dispenses more than advice. It is backed by reasoning and reflection. Amen-em-opet's philosophical bent is evident in the section on dealing with those who are mentally ill:

Do not tease a man who is in the hand of the god
Nor be fierce with him if he errs

For man is clay and straw
And the god is his builder.

IV. We have looked at wisdom sayings, now let us look at wisdom conveyed through dialogue.

- A.** Philosophical reflection, often expressed through dialogue, seems to have been more common in the Mesopotamian cultures than in Egypt.
- B.** The “Babylonian Theodicy” laments the suffering of the innocent in an unjust world. This is a long text from the eighth century B.C., composed of 27 stanzas of 11 lines each, in the form of a dialogue.
 - 1.** One scholar has described this text as “midway between theology and philosophy.” The dialogue is between an unnamed sufferer and his friend.
 - 2.** The sufferer tells of recent calamities that have hit him: the death of both his parents, the failure of his health, the loss of his riches. Wine doesn’t satisfy him. “Does a happy life still await me? I would like to know.”
 - 3.** His friend answers: “You are as steadfast as the earth, but the plan of the gods is concealed, seek then the grace of your god.”
 - 4.** The sufferer, in response, complains: “But those who don’t seek god prosper and those who do pray are impoverished.”
 - 5.** The friend persists in extolling the worship of the divine:

If you don’t seek the counsel of the god—how can you flourish?
Seek the kindly breeze of the gods
Then you will win back what you lost.
 - 6.** This exchange of views continues, the sufferer pointing out that “the world is full of contradictions.”
 - 7.** At the dialogue’s end, the sufferer implores his friend to help him gain understanding: “You are kind, my friend, behold my grief. Help me look at my distress, understand it.”
 - 8.** He closes with these words:

May the god who has abandoned me help me,
May the goddess who has betrayed me show me mercy.

V. Scholars see similarities between the “Babylonian Theodicy” and the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible.

- A.** Both confront the problem of suffering and do so in dialogic form.
- B.** The resolution of the “Babylonian Theodicy” resembles the end of Job in that the sufferer has accepted his fate, accepted God’s justice, and has the hope that his fortunes will change, as in the case of Job, who has his family and wealth restored to him.
- C.** The scholarly consensus is that the Book of Job and the “Babylonian Theodicy” share in a common literary tradition of the ancient Near East. This comparison returns us once again to a recurring pattern in scholarly analysis of ancient Near Eastern texts in general and myth in particular: the parallels to, and contrasts with, the text of the Hebrew Bible.

VI. In the first lecture of this course, we looked at four approaches to the study of myth:

- A.** Myth as ancient science.
- B.** Myth as a reflection of history.
- C.** Myth and ritual.
- D.** The psychological power of myth.
- E.** Much of the wisdom literature discussed in this final lecture is embedded in myth and can be understood as an ancient form of psychological observation and advice.

Essential Reading:

Frederick Greenspan, ed., *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, pp. 129–149, 381–435.

Supplementary Reading:

Jean Botero, *Mesopotamia*, pp. 226–231.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are there modern forms of wisdom literature? And is their message radically different than the messages of the ancient texts?
2. Do you see more of a commonality or a difference between biblical wisdom texts and those of Egypt and Mesopotamia?

Timeline

- 3500–3000 B.C. Development of writing systems and urban culture in Egypt and Mesopotamia.
- 2700–2400 B.C. Pyramid Age in Egypt and Sumerian city-states in Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh, Sargon of Akkad as historical figures.
- 1500–1200 B.C. Hittite power in Anatolia; Ugarit flourishes. New Kingdom in Egypt and Amarna age (14th century).
- 1250 B.C. Estimated date for the Exodus from Egypt.
- 1000–930 B.C. United monarchy of Israel.
- 930–722 B.C. Divided monarchy: Israel/Judah.
- 586 B.C. Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.

Glossary

Amarna letters: Correspondence from the 14th century B.C. between the Egyptian royal court and the courts of Middle Eastern vassals and monarchs.

Cuneiform: The script used in the writing systems of the Mesopotamian civilizations. The signs were made with a stylus and incised in clay.

Enuma Elish: An epic poem recited on the Babylonian new year. It contains references to a creation account.

Instruction texts: Egyptian collections of wisdom sayings, often presented as instructions from father to son or a king to his subjects.

Memphite theology: A creation account originating in the Egyptian priesthood of Memphis.

Neolithic Revolution: Occurred c. 6000 in the ancient Near East; the transition from hunter/gatherer subsistence to settlement reliant on agriculture.

Tell: A mound formed by successive habitation over the centuries.

Theodicy: A text that vindicates divine justice.

Biographical Notes

Akhenaten: Egyptian king of the 14th century B.C., known as the “heretic pharaoh.”

Enheduanna: Daughter of Sargon of Akkad, priestess and poet of the mid-third millennium B.C.

Enkidu: Gilgamesh’s companion. On his death, Gilgamesh is inconsolable.

Gilgamesh: King of Uruk (26th century B.C.); later, a figure of myth, hero of a great epic poem that developed in successive Mesopotamian cultures.

Hammurabi: Ruler of Babylon (18th century B.C.); promulgated a famous law code.

Menes: Egyptian ruler (c. 3000 B.C.) identified with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Nefertiti: Queen of Egypt, spouse of Akhenaten; identified with ideal beauty.

Sargon of Akkad: Mesopotamian ruler (24th century B.C.), whose name became synonymous with the idea of empire.

Sumerians: In southern Iraq c. 3000 B.C., the people and rulers of the first city-states and the originators of writing.

Telepinu: A Hittite god associated with the cycles of death and rebirth.

Utnapishtim: The “Noah” figure in the Gilgamesh epic, also known as Atrahasis.

Gods of Mesopotamia:

Anu: “Heaven god,” removed from humankind.

Ea (Enki): God of the oceans of the deep, aids humankind.

Enlil: Associated with creation.

Inanna: Sumerian goddess of love and war; known in Akkadian as Ishtar.

Marduk: Babylonian god, Ea’s son; he is a younger god who emerges victorious from a struggle with the forces of chaos.

Gods of Canaan:

Anat: Canaanite goddess of war.

Asherah: Goddess; consort of El; associated with the “sacred grove.”

Baal: Son of El; through struggle, becomes the chief god.

El: Head of the pantheon.

Gods of Egypt:

Horus: The falcon god of kingship.

Isis: Wife/sister of Horus.

Nut: Egyptian sky goddess. She gives birth to the sun each dawn.

Osiris: God of the dead; the deceased pharaoh “becomes Osiris.”

Ptah: Egyptian god associated with the city of Memphis.

Seth: God of chaos; battles both Osiris and Horus.

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Internet Resources:

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University of Chicago, Oriental Institute, www.-oi.uchicago.edu (for information on artifacts and archaeology).